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SILVERBLADE FIRED SHOT AFTER SHOT AT THE VISION.

OR, The Border Beagle at Bay.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF 'SILVERBLADE, THE SHOSHONE,'
'MUSTANG SAM,' 'CHINCAPIN DAN,'
'DAINTY LANCE,' ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SEEKER AFTER TRUTH.

CRESTING his head and neck after a fashion that curiously resembled a startled snake, Wah-pa-doo-tah parted the leaves directly before him, holding his breath as he listened, his greenish-gray eyes glittering in the ray of sunlight which fell athwart his fantastically painted face.

Only a few yards away rose the Medicine Lodge, composed for the most part of painted

skins and dingy blankets. Just beyond this was the camp proper, and it was to the dull, indistinct murmur arising from the occupants of this, that Red Leaf was listening.

Keen though his sense of hearing was, Red Leaf failed to catch a single sentence, and only a disconnected word here and there; but this seemed to please rather than annoy him, for a grim smile caused his mask of paint to wrinkle as he silently crept through the bushes and drew still nearer the rear of the Medicine Lodge.

With one hand touching the dry skin, he paused again, casting a keen, suspicious glance around, like one fearing espial; but if any curious eyes were upon him, his acuteness failed to detect the fact, and lifting the lower edge of the skin, Red Leaf slipped inside the tepee.

The entrance-flap was firmly pegged down, and when the skin fell behind him, Red Leaf was in a gloom that fell little short of darkness.

His full chest swelled out with a breath that indicated relief, and crossing the tented space, he peered through a narrow slit in the skins, upon the delegation of mighty warriors and wise chiefs, so patiently awaiting the pleasure of the prophet who proclaimed himself the mouth-piece of the Indian Messiah.

These numbered nearly a score in all, and to one ignorant of their real character, might easily have been mistaken for a pack of migrating tramps and ragamuffins; but a closer inspection would have made the difference clear. Those seeming rags and patches were but additional ornaments in the savage eye, just as each "white man's hat" bore from one to half a dozen "Indian feathers," dipped in dye and tipped with gaudy bits of ribbon.

In but one thing alone was there uniformity: each Indian was armed to the teeth, with Winchester repeating-rifle, revolvers and belt full of fixed ammunition, in addition to knife and hatchet, such as men of their race have borne from time immemorial.

For the most part these Indians were gathered about a low-burning camp-fire, the heat cast out by which was very grateful on that cool autumn day, now that the sun was lost to view behind the western hills. They were squatting upon their heels, smoking their pipes, passing brief sentences around the circle, and casting frequent glances toward the closed Medicine Lodge; but there was one exception worth noting.

Apart from the rest of the delegation, stood Silverblade, the Shoshone, his head bent a little back, his eyes fixed upon a patch of scarlet sky through an opening in the brown foliage, his arms folded tightly across his slowly heaving chest.

The heavy blue blanket had dropped from his shoulders, leaving his slender yet muscular body naked to the middle. His face was beardless, but the razor had left it so, not the painful tweezers of the full-blood. From the crown of his shapely head hung the neatly braided scalplock, brightened by ribbons and strings of beads; but the rest of his hair, touching his shoulders, was too fine and soft for that of a full-blood, to say nothing of the natural curl with which each lock ended.

Passing quickly over the figures gathered about the fire, the gaze of Wah-pa-doo-tah rested upon Silverblade, a low, grating sound passing his lips. If not a curse of vicious hatred, then that painted face bore false evidence.

Turning abruptly away from the slit, Red Leaf lifted one end of a long Indian drum, striking it sharply with a padded stick.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

As one man, the Indians gathered about the fire sprung to their feet, and all eyes turned toward the Medicine Lodge. The skin flap was pushed back, and the prophet stepped forth, his hands extended as though in silent blessing. Every head but one was bent before his coming. Silverblade alone stood erect, and a half-frown came into his face as he encountered that keen, stern glance.

Did that fiery glance mean hatred to the man, or only reproof to the doubter?

"My children," began Wah-pa-doo-tah, in deep, not unmusical tones, pausing when yet a few paces from the fire, his hands slowly sinking to the level of his waist, where showed the metal-bound butts of a brace of heavy revolvers. "The body of Red Leaf has slept, but the ears of his spirit have been wide open. Words came to them, and with the words a mighty gladness such as you must share with me."

"The Great Spirit spoke to his favored son, father?" slowly ventured one of the delegation: a tall, withered, scarred chief of the Grosventres.

"The Great Spirit's son, our new Messiah," bowed the medicine-man, as his arms formed a cross before his breast. "He whom we have

journeyed so far to see and to hear. He whose coming is to restore the glory of his chosen children, even as his blasting breath wipes from the face of the earth all pale-faces! Even his voice—the voice of the Indian Messiah—came to the ears of my spirit as my body lay like one dead!"

"And the words thus spoken, father?" hesitated Shooting Backward, the Grosventres chief. "Are we to hear them?"

"So the voice added, before it passed away," bowed the medicine-man. "Tell my children all, and let them know that the Messiah is pleased with them," said the spirit voice unto Wah-pa-doo-tah.

The Indians interchanged swift glances, and more than one eager face grew grave and looked disappointed. There was a brief silence, broken at length by the old Grosventres:

"The words sound good, and we are very grateful for so much, my father. But—was there no more? Are we to hear only through thy ears, see only through thy eyes? When we go back to our people, and they ask us of the Messiah, will these few words be enough to send them on the war-path to their brothers of the South?"

"If your people are all red, those words should be enough, but I have still more to tell my children. They know that, far as we have journeyed, there lie three days' travel between this and the spot where Red Leaf saw and talked with the Indian Messiah. What we take three days to crawl over, is but a single step to the Messiah, and he—the words that filled my heart with joy were these:

"Tell my red children that their eyes shall see and their ears hear. Bid them come to me with clean hearts, and before another sun rises, they shall know what words to carry back to their people. They should have seen me before this, but my heart was sore because of the doubters among the faithful!"

Red Leaf flashed a look toward the young man standing apart from the rest of the delegation, and Silverblade, unable to ignore his meaning, stepped forward, speaking slowly, in almost cold tones:

"Only fools and babes believe all they hear, without asking for proof, my father. Wise men ask to know, before they can believe!"

"That is the white blood speaking, David Woodbridge!"

"David Woodbridge is dead. I am Silverblade, son of Weenamoo, child of He-That-Fights-Long. If white blood once flowed through my veins, it is all gone now, swallowed up by the red."

"So you have said before, and so I have tried hard to believe. Why should these doubts give me so much trouble? Because the New Messiah needs just such converts as Silverblade might prove, if he could find the new life, if he could win the eyes that look through night to light, the tongue that knows how to spread the new gospel throughout the land of the Great Serpent."

"Before one can preach, one must learn."

"Before one can learn, one must be willing to be taught," swiftly retorted the prophet, his thin lips curling away from his teeth, lending him an almost wolfish expression for the moment. "Are you this, son of Weenamoo? Have you ever been more than a doubter? What have you done to justify the confidence expressed by your mother's people? Did they not consult together, then come to me and say: 'He-That-Fights-Long was a great chief and a mighty warrior! While he lived, the Snake-children never knew defeat, on war-path or council-ground. Weenamoo alone of all his children yet lives. She is a squaw, but she has a son. True, there is white blood flowing in his veins, and he has been walking in the white man's road; but this is all the better for us now. He can look on both sides of the trail, and tell us which is the safest. Take the son of Weenamoo with you, father, and as he comes back, so will the children of the Great Snake act: if Silverblade comes, we will dig up the hatchet and sharpen the scalping-knife: if he who comes back should be David Woodbridge, then the Shoshones will know that the Indian Messiah is but another idle dream coming from a cracked skull!"

"These were the words I received from the chiefs of your people, son of Weenamoo. I have prayed long and prayed often that the glorious truth might wash away all doubt, so that the waiting Shoshones might behold the coming of Silverblade, but—"

The young man lifted a hand, and the prophet ceased speaking.

"My father, you say you have stood face to face with the Messiah?"

"Yes."

"And so standing, you heard, you saw, you had full faith, and you firmly believed?"

"I had full faith, and I still believe."

"Good! So will we all believe after we have seen and heard the Indian Messiah. Until then, though our lips may declare our belief, in our hearts there must linger at least a shade of doubt. Even you, our father, and the chosen mouth-piece of the New Messiah, must have have doubted before you knew, for then there was white blood flowing in your veins."

"The finger of the Messiah turned it all red, because he saw that the Sioux had perfect faith. But you, son of Weenamoo and Luke Woodbridge! If there lingers even the ghost of a doubt in your soul when I have brought you face to face with the Messiah, we be unto you! If you see and hear, yet have perfect faith, the red drops in your veins shall turn white, and ye shall perish even as one of the thrice-cursed race whose doom has been spoken by the coming lips!"

"Let it beso," gravely bowed the young man. "I have followed Red Leaf as an earnest seeker after truth, not alone for myself, but for my mother's people as well. They gave me their ears, their eyes, bidding me receive and bring them back the whole truth. They said they could trust Silverblade, but he reminded them that he was still young, and so they chose three wise Shoshones to bear him company. They are here. They listen to the words I am speaking. They have heard the joyful pledge given by Red Leaf, and they are weary of idle talk. They are eager to reach the end, and see with their own eyes, hear with their own ears. If they see and hear differently from Silverblade, still it will be well, for the truth will go back to our people, and the truth is what the children of the Mother Snake are waiting for. If one is to perish, three will remain. I have spoken."

With another dignified bow, the young man drew back a couple of paces, lifting the blanket from where it hung about his middle, closing its folds with true savage grace, yet leaving his bare right arm free.

For a few seconds there was silence, broken finally by one of the elderly Shoshones, who rose to briefly say:

"The son of Weenamoo has spoken, and his words are good. We have not come so far from our people just to talk: let us see and hear. Go with us to where the Indian Messiah lives, Red Leaf, and then the children of the Mother Snake will give their answer."

"That is very good!" cried Shooting Backward, nodding vigorously. "Show to us the Indian Messiah, father, that we may know how to answer the questions our people are waiting to ask!"

CHAPTER II.

PUT TO THE TEST.

THE greenish-gray eyes of him who called himself the mouthpiece of the Indian Messiah, passed from face to face of each speaker in turn, but his painted face might have been a mask of stone for all the emotion it betrayed. And only waiting for the murmur of approval which greeted the words of Shooting Backward to die away, he made reply:

"It shall be as my children ask. Red Leaf will guide them where the New Messiah awaits their coming."

"Is it far from here, father?"

"It is not too far, else the Messiah would never have bidden Red Leaf to bring his children. More than that, Red Leaf cannot say."

The prophet turned away to the medicine tent, but he remained inside but a few seconds. When he emerged, he carried the rude wooden drum, and his head was muffled in a long and broad scarf. If he could see aught, then the peep-hole was very cunningly arranged, for not a glimpse of his face was visible as he paused in the fire-glow for a few seconds, turning slowly around, his head bent backward, strange, inarticulate sounds issuing from his throat.

Then, like one obeying an unseen impulse, Red Leaf moved away in an almost due westerly course, pacing deliberately, yet avoiding each obstacle as though gifted with more than mortal vision.

The sun had long since disappeared, and the twilight had deepened into night. Even those with free eyes had to use care in moving over that rough, bush-spotted tract, but Red Leaf seemed to find no difficulty, even after his pace quickened until his followers were forced to almost trot in order to keep from being distanced.

Their tethered horses were passed by without a pause on the part of the guide, but even the aged Grosventres never gave the animals

glance in passing. The Messiah would not ask of them more than they were able to give!

For nearly a mile that curious procession wound through the darkness, Red Leaf finally coming to a pause near the foot of a rocky hill, or range. For the second time he turned slowly around, his head bent back, his lungs emitting a guttural sound, the padded drumstick quivering above the tightly stretched skin: to finally fall with a dull, hollow thump! as the prophet once more faced the white rocks rising high above their level.

He jerked the muffler from his head and cast one sweeping glance around. His head bent as though in silent prayer, drum and drumstick falling unheeded at his feet as his arms formed a cross over his bosom.

"Is it here, oh, father?" huskily muttered Shooting Backward.

"It is here, my children!" cried the medicine-man, in clear, ardent tones, seeming to lose his professional gravity in the excitement of the moment. "Quick! kindle a fire, that no shadows may mask a face from the eyes of the coming Messiah!"

Dry leaves and grass were readily found, and five minutes later a crackling fire was banishing the gloom from that spot; its ruddy glow lighting up each rudely picturesque figure, bringing forth each feature of old face and young, as the delegation stood in almost painful suspense, awaiting the coming of the Indian Messiah whose wondrous fame had spread so widely throughout the land.

Red Leaf faced the white rocks, his arms uplifted, his face thrown into strong relief by the flames against the outer darkness.

"We await thy coming, all-powerful father! Our eyes are longing to see, our ears open to receive, thy precious message! If doubts still lurk in our hearts, it needs but a glimpse of thy face to make all clear, all pure, all faithful forever more! Come to us, oh, mighty spirit! Speak to thy children that—"

"I am here," sounded a deep, yet hollow voice, coming from—whither?

The Indians stared upward, but saw nothing to account for that voice. It appeared to come from high up the rocks, yet nothing more than those dim, ghostly outlines were visible. Of them all, Red Leaf alone seemed able to distinguish the form of the speaker, and he bowed his head in reverence, crossing his arms over his heart as he said:

"I thank thee, mighty father! Now that thou hast revealed thyself unto our eyes, add to our happiness by giving these, thy children, good words to take back to their people."

"What is it these children would have?" asked the voice.

"Clearer eyesight, for one thing," boldly spoke up Silverblade, on whose strong, yet handsome face there hung a shadow which no fire-glow alone could dissipate. "We hear, but we cannot see. If we are to bear a message back to our people, they will ask us what manner of lips gave birth to the words. Must we tell them we saw nothing?"

"If the heart of Weenamoo's child was cleaner, his eyesight would not require strengthening," sternly uttered the voice, now speaking in the Shoshone dialect. "A doubter may hear and live. If he sees, and does not believe implicitly, he surely will die!"

"Be it so!" almost defiantly cried the youth, his lithe figure drawn proudly erect. "Brush the dust from my eyes, mighty father! If I am to die, it is so written! Only—let me see, as well as hear!"

There came no answer to this appeal, in words, but slowly a light began to grow in front of the white rocks, midway up the stony range. And as their strained eyes caught sight of this, one and all of the delegation watched its growth in breathless suspense.

Little by little the light strengthened, forming itself into an irregular column several yards in height, and more than as many feet in width, the edges of which seemed to flicker and sway in tremulous waves, yet ever retaining the same proportions.

It was different from the red glow of the fire below, yet was unlike the yellow of candle or lamp. It had a faint tinge of green, and though so dim, even now it proved straining to those eagerly-watching eyes, giving them much the impression lent by an eclipse of the sun.

Red Leaf sunk upon his knees, his arms crossed, his head bent as though in reverence, low mutterings passing his painted lips. But none of the others moved or altered their positions. They could only gaze, and wonder, and wait for the end.

Brighter clearer grew the light, yet even

then it possessed a peculiar mistiness. It was almost as though a strong light was being turned upon a column of grayish-green smoke.

Then came the change for which the Indians were watching; for, upon that illuminated column, a human figure was growing, dim and ghostly at first, but gradually gaining body and outlines, until all eyes could make out the form of an aged man, with long hair and full beard of snowy whiteness, wearing a gray blanket after the Indian fashion, the folds meeting beneath his right arm, leaving that bared member free for use or gesticulation.

But little beyond this was distinguishable even by the keenest among those startled eyes, for the smoke-like background wavered in the light breeze, and that ghostly vision grew clearer, only to fade again in time with those waverings.

"Do you still doubt, child of He-That-Fights-Long?" asked the voice which had first startled them, the bared right arm lifting, its hand pointing toward Silverblade as he still stood rigidly erect.

The ghost of a smile flitted across the young man's face as he heard those words, spoken in English, and he gravely made reply:

"I see, but I do not hear, great father. I am all Silverblade, now. I have put away white talk with my white blood. For the time I was old enough to begin to have dreams of the war-path, my feet were forced to enter the Whiteman's Road. I followed it until there came to my ears strange whispers of a New Messiah, then the red blood bequeathed my veins by He-That-Fights-Long, began to stir and sting and call out for—what, great father?"

"For the truth!"

"It may be as my father says," bowed Silverblade, gravely. "If I had not left behind me all white blood, I might be wiser, now. I can hear what sounds like words, but cannot understand them."

"You have heard my message, given through my chosen mouth-piece, Silverblade," sternly said the vision, but now speaking the Shoshone dialect. "You have refused to believe, though the words came from a straight tongue. You are still in doubt, though you have come so far to learn the truth. What shall I say to clear the mud from your mind?"

"Tell me the plain truth, great father," with another bow, his erect figure forming a strong contrast to those kneeling, bowed forms; for all save Silverblade had imitated the example set by Red Leaf, when that strange vision took to itself a voice.

"If I should do this, will you have faith, son of Weenamoo?"

"I will try; I am trying now, great father. I ask no greater gift than implicit belief, but—bear with me, father," as the ghostly shape flung up his arm as if in impatience. "Remember how long I have walked in the Whiteman's Road. Remember how many cunning tricks and wondrous impostures I have witnessed while so walking. And if pale-faces can do all that, with only sport for payment, may they not do even more, when all this vast land is at stake?"

"Then you believe the Indian Messiah is a pale-face trickster?"

"I do not say that, great father," was the grave response. "I will not even think it, but—I have seen fully as wicked tricks as this would be, if true. And knowing what the pale-faces can do, when they try, I wish to keep my people from suspecting anything of that sort. And for their sake, even more than for my own, I beg the great father will give us some positive proof that he is, what we dearly long to believe, not only a Messiah, but one whose coming is to benefit the red-men."

"What proof do you ask, son of Weenamoo?"

"The Messiah knows everything," with another bow, then gazing fixedly upon that ghostly figure against the rocks. "I am but a poor, ignorant Shoshone, whose sole merit is that he wishes to learn the whole truth. As a Shoshone I have spoken, and the great father has replied. But all here are not familiar with the tongue of the Mother Snake. One—there is a great chief present: let the Messiah speak to him in his own tongue!"

As he spoke, Silverblade pointed toward one of the kneeling figures by the fire, and before an answer could be given, Red Leaf cried out:

"Rise up, Shooting Backward, head chief of the once mighty Grosventres! Rise up, and hearken unto the Messiah!"

Tremblingly the aged warrior obeyed, hands crossed above his heart, his sunken eyes fixed reverently upon that awesome vision.

Silverblade frowned blackly, but Red Leaf was still bowed, and caught not that burning

glance. If he had spoken with a purpose, nothing in his manner now betrayed that fact.

"Do you believe in the Messiah, Shooting Backward?" asked that figure, addressing the Grosventres in his own dialect.

"I have perfect faith, mighty father," bowed the chief. "I never doubted the truth from the first. I only came so far; that I might go back to my people and tell them what my eyes saw, what my ears heard, in order that they, too, might believe and be saved."

"It is well with thee, my son, and so shall it be well with thy people when they have heard your report."

He stretched out his bare arm, as in a benediction, and with a choking breath, Shooting Backward sunk to his knees in silent adoration.

"Have I answered your test, son of Weenamoo?" sternly demanded the Messiah, turning toward Silverblade and speaking in Shoshone. "Are you satisfied that I am not an impostor?"

"You have spoken to the chief of the Grosventres, father, and he has answered you. Still, I can do so much. I can speak to a dozen red-men, each in his own dialect, and each red-man will understand what I tell him. Yet—I am but a poor, ignorant Shoshone. I am but a weak mortal. The Indian Messiah should be more—much more than that!"

"Do you dare even hint that he is not more?" harshly demanded the voice.

"I dare nothing, mighty spirit. I only say what might be, if the white men wished to sweep our people from off the face of the earth, by fooling them into such a terribly unequal fight. How long would they be able to stand up before the rifles of the soldiers, if—"

"Forever, if the Messiah so willed it! See!" and his arms flew out to each side as his blanket dropped from his naked bosom. "You are all armed with the terrible rifles of the whites. Aim at my heart! Shoot straight, and if I die, then am I an impostor! Shoot, Silverblade!"

Swift as thought, the youth raised his Winchester and fired straight at that bared breast!

CHAPTER III.

A PROUD HEAD BOWED DOWN.

WITHOUT stopping to count the cost, Silverblade accepted that stern challenge, and with actions so swift that no mere mortal could have foiled them by ducking or dodging, he covered that exposed breast and fired, not once alone, but thrice, as rapidly as his practiced hands could manipulate the repeating-rifle.

Startled, the kneeling Indians lifted their heads, some shrinking back in horror, others with a touch of curiosity mingling with their awe, but the eyes of all riveted on that illumined shape which meant so much to their awakened hopes and passions.

The shape swayed gently, but so it had done before those shots, in the faint breeze that rustled the drying leaves. At the second shot it even seemed to recoil slightly, and its left arm came back to cover its bare bosom; but only for an instant. And when Silverblade breathlessly peered through the smoke of his own making, to note the effect of these shots, the vision stood as before, without visible injury.

"Has the son of Weenamoo forgotten how to shoot straight?" asked that voice, in stern mockery. "Is that one of the terrible rifles before which no red-man could stand, and live?"

With a choking sound Silverblade fired shot after shot at the vision, shifting his aim from head to limbs, seeking some vulnerable spot, since that broad bosom seemed proof against his lead.

Not a hand was lifted to check his actions, though more than half of the delegation had sprung to their feet, and Red Leaf was chanting wildly one of his wordless songs.

Only when the dull click of the falling hammer told of an empty magazine, did Silverblade cease his mad test. Then the smoking rifle dropped from his hands. He stared dizzily at that spectral shape, looking in vain for blood or wound. Instead, he beheld the figure lift its blanket from where the belt kept it from falling below its middle, drawing the folds gracefully about body and shoulder, the arm left bare making a gesture as of pitying scorn.

Despite the strong emotions which filled his heart and brain, the half-blood knew that his hands had been steady, his eye true to his will. A better rifle had never been built, and he knew that each bullet had sped true to his aim. Then—what was this?

His head slowly bowed, his trembling hands lifting as though to lend it support. His hands crossed over his breast, but firmly, fiercely as

they pressed above his wildly beating heart, they could not keep back the hoarse, gasping groan that found its way to his lips.

That voice gave a slow, hollow-sounding laugh, and the spectral shape seemed to increase in size, to move toward the awe-struck Indians as though about to descend to their level. For what?

"We believe! We have faith! Be not angry with us, thy poor children, mighty father!" hoarsely cried the aged chief of the Grosventres.

He shrunk back, but only for a moment. Then, leaping to his feet with something akin to his youthful activity, he jerked a gleaming tomahawk from the belt about his middle, making the weapon quiver above his head as he crouched for a leap upon the young Shoshone.

"To you we owe it, dog of a mixed breed!" he snarled, savagely.

Silverblade sunk to his knees, his head bowing lower, until those un-Indian-like locks of black hair formed a veil to his face; but this unfeigned humility had naught to do with the infuriated chief. If his ears caught those fierce words, his brain heeded them not.

"Peace, my children!" sternly cried that voice.

"Hold, Shooting Backward!" cried Red Leaf, springing forward just in time to arrest that sinewy arm and turn the glittering weapon aside.

"If you say it, father," muttered the old chief, yielding to that grasp, though his sunken eyes still shone redly.

"One mightier than I says hold, chief. If the Messiah wishes death, death will surely come at his bidding. Peace—he speaks!"

"Silverblade, son of Weenamoo, grandson of He-That-Fights-Long, child of the Mother Snake!" slowly, sternly spoke that voice from the air.

An inarticulate cry burst from the lips of the youth. He lifted his head. He flung up his arms, clasping his fingers rigidly together. His eyes rose to that spectral shape, but drooped again, as though unable to longer endure that strange glow.

"Silverblade, you asked for a proof, and I offered you a test such as the white blood in your heart could better understand. You accepted that test. Now, do you still doubt?"

"No longer, mighty father," huskily answered the youth, bowing lower in his awed humility. "Pity—I believe—I have faith!"

"It is well—more than well!" a proud, glad echo coming into the voice. "There is far more glory in converting one such doubter, than in gaining a thousand followers who take all for granted, who ask no questions, who give no reasons for their faith! Now, Silverblade?"

"Mighty father!"

"But one thing remains to prove your conversion, and that shall be a final test of your perfect faith. Arise, go forth through the wide land, and spread broadcast the glad tidings! Tell unto all people in whose veins the red blood flows, to prepare for the coming of the New Messiah! Bid them be ready for the work that shall be allotted each pair of hands, when that glad morning dawns!"

"I will go, mighty father," said Silverblade, rising to his feet. "I will bid them be ready. If they ask me when that glad day is to dawn, I will tell them—what, mighty father?"

"Wait, Silverblade," with a majestic gesture. "You came here a skeptic, you will go away a true believer. That is good! But you may meet others who find it hard to believe, and you must know what words to give them back when they question you, even as your lips questioned mine. Before you go, you must hear the message sent unto all his red children, by the Indian Messiah."

There was a brief pause, during which more than one of the delegation cast covert glances toward the youth, whose unfaith seemed bringing a far richer reward than their blind belief. Only glances, as yet. But when that awe-inspiring vision should have vanished—

"Children of the North!" at length spoke the voice, and the eyes of that illumined shape seemed passing from face to face, from figure to figure. "I see before me sons of the Mother Snake. I see wise chieftains of the Grosventres, the Bannocks, the Crees, and it makes the heart within my bosom throb with great joy, for now I know that the truth is spreading throughout the land, to the North, even as it has covered the West, the South, and the East, even to the Father of Waters.

"What I have revealed unto the Sioux, the Cheyennes, the Arapahoes, and many other tribes, through their chosen envoys, I now make clear to your minds and hearts. Listen, my chil-

dren, and treasure the message I give you for your people!

"Through more generations than there are hairs in my beard, I have gazed in sorrow upon the troubles which have rained upon the red-men. I have seen them driven from their homes, from the graves of their fathers, from their hunting-grounds. I have seen them dwindle from great hosts, to mere handfuls. I have watched the whites spread and spread until they threaten to occupy all the land, leaving not room for a moccasined foot to stand alone! And seeing all this, the heart has turned red within my breast, and now I am an Indian, like the children I see before me.

"Why have I held back my hand so long? Because war is an awful calamity, and one that a peaceful heart abhors above all things! But when it comes to a choice between right and wrong, innocent and guilty, the true and the false, there can be but one choice: and I have made mine, after carefully weighing both sides.

"Wide as this earth may seem to mortal eyes, it is all too narrow for both red-man and white to occupy, side by side. One or the other must go, and when that point is reached, the end is plain enough!

"The Great Spirit was wise. He gave this portion of the earth to his red children. He placed the white faces on the other side of the big salt water, and gave to them men of black skins—buffalo-soldiers—to slave for them in the fields.

"That was good. If each color had remained content with the share bestowed, all would have remained well. But the white-faces grew greedy for more land, and they swarmed across the big waters. They came to this country, and saw that it was richer, more beautiful than their own. And so seeing, they coveted the land. Then—this is to be the end!

"Children, hearken to my words! Catch them in your ears, and cover them carefully over until they have taken strong root in you brains.

"When we look back, all seems dark and under an ugly cloud. The air is full of death, of graves, of bones that tell of battles where the living were too few to cover the dead from sight, from the hungry jaws of the skulking coyotes!

"This is what our eyes see when they turn backward, but how is it when we look ahead? Listen, my children, and heed well the words my lips now let fall!

"All is sunlight and joy and peace! There is no death, no fighting, no cold, no starvation there! No darkness, no ugly clouds! All is peace and plenty! The prairies are covered with wild horses, with buffalo in countless numbers, even as before the accursed pale-faces came with their fire-spitting weapons! There are antelope in millions! There are deer, and elk, and goats—everything to make the heart of the hunter beat high with joy!

"There are no graves, for those of the white man have been buried far out of sight, and those where the red children of the Indian Messiah once rested, have been emptied, each one giving forth a strong and healthy warrior, a fair squaw, or laughing pappoose! From salt water on one side to salt water on the other side, all is living, joyous, contented, all is peace, for the red-men once more possess the whole earth!"

The voice ceased, and after a brief pause, an almost simultaneous cry burst from the lips of the Indians who had so breathlessly listened to the one who drew such a perfect picture of savage bliss.

Only Silverblade was silent. He alone remained bowed, for he had not yet recovered from the terrible shock that spectral shape had given his incredulity.

"Great father," said the medicine-man, voicing the thoughts of nearly all of the Indians who had followed him on this pilgrimage. "It is a glorious picture thy voice hath painted for thy poor children, and great will be their happiness when all this comes to pass. They have suffered much, and suffered long; must they grow sick at heart with still further waiting?"

"They must wait until the time is fully ripe for my coming," and as it spoke, the strange voice grew harder, sterner, colder.

"And will that coming be long delayed, oh, Messiah?"

"Why has it been so long delayed? Why have I not come to bring eternal life and never-ending peace to my red children, do you ask, Wah-pa-doo-tah? Because of the unbelief which curses many of the red-men! Because I know, as you ought to know, son of the mighty Sioux, that were I to come in mortal shape, there are men of red blood who would gladly sell my life

to the pale-faces for a single extra ration! There are red-men who would barter my life for a single swallow of firewater!"

"Surely not, great father!"

"Surely yes," with increasing sternness. "I can see them now! I can see them serving the pale-faces, some among the renegades even bearing arms against their red brethren! Some of them killing with arms given them by the soldiers, scalping with knives paid for with goods stolen from the faithful red-men, who are so weak from starvation that they know not how to fight back!

"All this I see, and even more! I see men with red skins, who smile upon their brothers' faces, but who scowl at their backs. Men who are Indians in all but heart. Men who are called 'friendlies' by the whites.

"All this I see now, but when I look ahead, I miss them! And that alone gives me heart to wait and hope, as I wait and pray, that all true hearts may come to the light in time to be saved. But while I am forced to wait, by these unbelievers, let my children act in my stead."

"How shall we know what to do first, Messiah?" asked Red Leaf.

"Go to my chosen representatives, and act as they advise. Go to Sitting Bull, to Kicking Bear, to Short Bull, to Big Foot, to Red Cloud. When they say strike, strike swift and strike hard!"

The light was fading, the figure growing dim, but the old chief of the Grosventres sprang to his feet, crying aloud:

"Great father, may I speak one word?"

CHAPTER IV.

SHOOTING BACKWARD SEEKS FURTHER LIGHT.

ALREADY the spectral light had grown so dim that the outlines of the Indian Messiah seemed melting away, leaving hardly the semblance of a human shape visible, but at that cry, the light grew stronger, and once more the venerable shape stood revealed to those eager eyes.

"What more does Shooting Backward wish?" coldly demanded the voice. "Time is passing, and there are other hungry hearts to be filled with words of glorious truth."

"May I speak plainly, mighty spirit?" almost meekly asked the old savage, his head bent in reverence, his hands crossed over his heart.

"Speak, but be brief, Shooting Backward. Many others are praying for light of the Messiah, and he must go. What is it you wish?"

"I have seen and heard enough to fill my heart and brain, father, but Shooting Backward is old, and his skull may leak on the long trail back to his people. If he does not receive more light, will there be enough left to satisfy all who come to read the truth? Will they not think there is still dust in their eyes, and ask more time to wash it away?"

"You have heard the truth, chief. Tell them what the Messiah has spoken, and if there are still unbelievers, let them perish in their blindness."

"But if among the blind, should be the few still dear to the heart of Shooting Backward? He has one squaw left. She is very old, like her chief, but once she was young and comely. In the eyes of her chief, she is still very precious. If she fails to see the whole truth, simply because Shooting Backward turned away from the Messiah before all shadows were cleared out of his brain? Must she perish, then?"

"You are not an unbeliever, my son?"

"No. I believe, and I have faith. More than enough for one, but is it enough for so many? Will it last until my whole tribe recognize the truth? They are not many, now, but the Grosventres are still great warriors, and know how to fight, if fight they must. Still, great father, a little more light will be a very good thing for us all. Is it not so, my brothers?"

He turned to cast a glance over the rest of the delegation, and with hardly an exception, the response was as he wished.

"Shooting Backward speaks good words, great father. Give us more light, and then we will not lose the right trail."

"What do you wish to hear further, my son?" slowly asked the voice.

"Shooting Backward is very old. He has covered much ground since he became a brave. He has gone on two visits to the Great White Father, in the big village, where they make soldiers. He had his eyes with him, each time, and they saw so many wonders that they never had time to close in sleep."

"You went to Washington?"

"If the Messiah says so, so it must be," meekly bowed the old man. "It was where they make laws and soldiers, where the White Father has

his lodge. It was just after there had been much fighting, and the big white chiefs were counting how many of their braves had come back on their own legs, or the backs of their horses. Shooting Backward tried to count them, too, but his tongue was not nearly long enough. It grew weary, and the end began to bleed, but as he looked, he saw that the long-knives had only begun to come in sight. They kept coming, filling the broad trail from side to side. They kept coming until Shooting Backward turned dizzy with seeing so many faces: and each one was that of a strong warrior!"

"Well?" and there was strong impatience in the voice as it pronounced the word.

"When the chief came home, he called up the tribe, and counted them. It was not hard to do. He could almost have held his breath that long. And then, as now, Shooting Backward asked his heart this: 'How long would my people last, if war should break forth, and all those long-knives were to come after the red-men?'"

The old chief bent his head, but there was a keen, anxious glow in his sunken eyes as he peered through his brows at the spectral figure outlined upon that pillar of smoke.

"That was many years ago, my son, and the long-knives you tried to count then, are dead and in their graves by this."

"But they have left children to take up the arms they laid down. Have the white faces grown fewer since then, great father?"

"No; they are still more numerous than then."

"And the red-men are grown much less! Is it wisdom to talk of war, even with the Messiah on our side, father?" slowly demanded the chief. "True, we can fight, and fight hard. But—so we can die!"

There was a pause at this. The light grew dimmer, and the vision seemed on the point of fading away. To those anxious eyes, the face of the Messiah appeared to frown darkly, as though this persistent questioning had given him deep anger.

They were picked warriors, chosen quite as much for that as for their wisdom in council, but hardly one of their number but cowered and shrunk back before that frown, real or fancied. And even the old chieftain of the Grosventres, moved a little nearer to the medicine-man, who still retained his kneeling position, with bowed head.

Once more the light grew clearer, and the vision regained its former distinctness of outline. And once again the voice of the Indian Messiah came floating down to those waiting ears.

"There is truth and faith in your heart, chieftain of the Grosventres, else the Messiah would waste no further time trying to clear away the mists from your brain. As it is: open wide your ears, my red children, for the words now trembling upon my lips can be spoken but once."

"You ask, how can the few fight the many, yet hope to win a complete victory? I, the Messiah, reply: have perfect faith, and the end is sure! To all who believe, eternal life shall be given, but those who doubt and are of little faith, they shall perish, even as the thrice-cursed pale-faces must die!"

When the chosen day dawns, the Messiah will come to his red children, and his strong hand will lift them up, clear of the earth, beyond all danger. And as his voice gives the signal, a mighty wave of melted rocks shall sweep over this land, from salt water to salt water, burying beneath its might every white-face, every red-man who calls himself a Friendly, every one of mixed blood who has not turned all within his veins to pure red, through blind faith in the coming Messiah! So the Great Spirit hath said, and so his son now tells you!"

"Then there will be no fighting against the long-knives, father?" ventured Shooting Backward.

"Not after the Messiah comes with the death-song upon his lips. Before that—before the unbelievers grow so few that the son of the Great Spirit will not be ashamed to show his face to his red children, there may be fighting. There will be fighting, I may say! And while that fighting lasts, many will die, both of white and red people. The pale-faces will stay dead, but when the Messiah calls, each one who wore a red skin in life, will return from the grave, to live again. I tell you this, my children, and the Messiah knows not how to lie!"

There was a brief period of silence, then the voice came again:

"Have you won light enough, Shooting Backward?"

"Yes, great father," meekly bowed the chief.

"The light will last until I have shown the great truth to my people, and they will see so clearly that never an unbeliever will be found in all my tribe. I promise this; I, Shooting Backward?"

Before any of the other Indians could shape a question, even if they were urged to such a course by a lingering doubt, the spectral light began to fade, and that curious figure to melt into air, as it seemed.

Red Leaf lifted his head, and with it his arms. His hands reached out toward the fading light, and a low, inarticulate chant came from his lips. If words were used, none of those present save himself could understand them.

The light grew dimmer, then faded into nothingness. Beyond where the illumined column had been seen, were now visible the white rocks, showing faintly in the starlight. Nothing else. It was as though all that had passed was but a curious dream!

When his chant came to an end, Wah-pa-doo-tah rose to his feet, glancing at each face by the ruddy glow of the fire in turn. His eyes rested longest upon the still kneeling figure of the young Shoshone, however, and after a slight hesitation, he passed over to where Silverblade was, gently touching one of the bent shoulders.

A slight shiver was the only response, and the face was not uncovered until after Red Leaf spoke:

"The Messiah has gone to make happy the eyes and ears of more of his children, son of Weenamoo. But you have seen, and you have heard: are you still an unbeliever, my son?"

Slowly that lately proud head was lifted, and for a moment the medicine-man shrunk back from those eyes: they looked so sunken, so different from the orbs he had noted so often of late.

Silverblade almost timidly glanced toward the point where the vision had shown itself, but the dim rocks alone met his eyes. And as though this broke the spell which had fallen over him, mind and body, after so rashly tempting the vengeance of the Indian Messiah by doing his level best to prove him an impostor by making him death's subject, Silverblade sprang to his feet, reeling dizzily for a single breath, but then rallying, looking more like his usual self as he made reply:

"I have seen and heard. I know now, what I so long tried to believe in vain. There is a Messiah! I have seen him! I have heard his voice! My doubts are gone, never to return while breath lasts! From this time on, until the coming of the Messiah to his whole people, I am his! I am a Ghost Dancer!"

Red Leaf turned abruptly away from those glittering eyes, possibly because he feared the young Shoshone was still sane enough to read aright the vicious smile which he could not entirely keep from curling his painted lips.

"And you, my children?" he asked, flashing his greenish-gray eyes from face to face. "You have seen and heard. The Messiah has more than made good the word Red Leaf passed, before you left your people. Are you content?"

"We are more than content," bowed Shooting Backward. "Wah-pa-doo-tah is our father, next to the Messiah himself. His praises shall ring in the ears of our people, and our papposes shall learn to bow their heads in worship at sound of his honored name."

"Wah-pa-doo-tah is but a single mouth-piece out of the many chosen by the Messiah to prepare his red children for his return to earth. If praise is due, pay it unto our great father, not to his poor son."

The medicine-man stooped to pick up his drum and stick, then made a sign which the Indians readily interpreted. They quickly extinguished the fire, and having secured their weapons, they fell into line behind the prophet, who led them by the most direct route back to where stood the Medicine Lodge.

The camp-fire here was quickly replenished, and as the Indians showed signs of filling their pipes for a smoke, and doubtless a sober discussion of the strange vision which had been vouchsafed them that evening, Red Leaf lifted a hand in token of a wish to add a few words.

"You have heard the Indian Messiah talk, my children, and you know that his words are very good. If so many other chiefs had not been waiting to learn the truth from his own lips, in so many different places, hundreds of miles apart, doubtless he would have said even more."

"Among other things, he would have told you, what I tell you now, as his mouth-piece; that the first fighting will surely be among the different agencies of the great Sioux people. And there their brothers from the North must

go, to bear their share of the battle, even as our brothers from the West and the far South will come."

"It is there the great and wise Sitting Bull lives?"

"And Sitting Bull is the chief who is to represent the Messiah until the day of his coming. It will be Sitting Bull who gives the signal for fighting, and Sitting Bull to whom all true believers in the Indian Messiah must look for orders. Go tell your people, then take them at once to join the mighty medicine-man of the Sioux! So speaks the Indian Messiah, through his mouth-piece, Wah-pa-doo-tah!" ended the prophet, as he turned away to vanish from view inside his lodge.

CHAPTER V.

THE INDIAN MESSIAH AND HIS MOUTH-PIECE.

RED LEAF paused for an instant in front of the tepee before parting the skin flap which served as a door, and when his fantastically-arrayed figure had vanished from their sight, the Indian delegation saw that his medicine-staff hung across the entrance.

"Our father is weary: he wishes to sleep," muttered Shooting Backward, in subdued tones.

At the same time, Red Leaf was peering through the little slit in front of the lodge waiting to make sure his silent signal was seen and would be honored. Not that he really entertained any doubt, but he was trained to leave nothing to chance which might be bettered by forethought or cool cunning.

"Good!" he told himself in a silent whisper, as his practiced eyes read those faces by the ruddy glow of the camp-fire. "They are fixed for a long pow-wow together, and when they do give thought to sleep, they'd sooner rouse the Old Boy himself than do aught to break the slumbers of their medicine-man. Ha! ha! ha!"

Only for the little light which found a way through the smoke-opening in the top of the lodge, all would have been utter darkness inside, but Red Leaf had a fine sense of locality, and without risking even the light of a match, he took only a few seconds in which to complete his preparations.

One blanket was lightly rolled up, an end being brought around the wooden drum. This was placed upon a buffalo-robe, and another blanket cast over all. Then, topping the drum with his feathered head-dress, Red Leaf felt that his preliminary work was complete.

"It served my purpose in daylight, so I reckon it'll do to-night," he muttered, barely above his breath. "The red fools will suffer anything short of death before calling me, but if they should—well, even then they'd never dare risk more than a single peep into the Medicine Lodge, so long as my staff hangs across the door!"

Still in almost utter darkness, Red Leaf removed the greater part of his insignia as medicine-man, leaving his muscular person less gaudy and attractive, from a savage point of view, but far better suited for night travel through a rough section.

He felt of his pistols, making sure the cylinders worked easily, gave a touch to the silver-hafted knife in its beaded sheath, paused for a final look at the Indian delegation gathered around the cheery camp-fire, then sunk to the ground and crept noiselessly under the skin wall, opposite the entrance to his lodge.

The sky was unclouded, but the dying leaves which still clung to the branches overhead formed a sufficient shade, and without a sound to betray his passage, Red Leaf crept away from the tepee, following in the tracks he had left a number of hours earlier, while his deluded followers devoutly believed his body was bound by a trance and his spirit receiving precious words from the Great Spirit.

When at a safe distance from the Medicine Lodge, Red Leaf rose to his feet, drawing a long breath of relief, like one who cast aside an irksome burden.

"It's fun up to a certain point; but after that is once passed—ugh!" breaking off with a shiver of disgust, flinging out his hands as though casting away something disagreeable, if not actually dangerous. "If I couldn't steal off for a free breath, now, I'd have to play the devil with those red-skinned idiots! I'd burst out in their faces, and give them—well, it wouldn't be good medicine, at any rate!"

As though this brief outburst had greatly relieved his mind, Red Leaf pressed forward, heading toward the rocky range, from the base of which the Indian delegation had witnessed such a wondrous vision.

There was little of the inspired prophet in this muttering, chuckling, gesticulating fellow, just then. True, he wore a portion of the medicine

regalia, for the night air was too cool for nakedness, and he was too shrewd to run too great risks. His face was still covered with paint, laid on in mystic designs. But that was all left of Wah-pa-doo-tah, the Sioux, just now.

It did not take long for such nimble legs to carry their owner to the foot of the rocks, and pausing there merely for a locating glance, Red Leaf began scaling the gray rocks, pausing shortly thereafter to utter a low, thrilling whistle, much such as a startled night-bird might give forth. Twice this note was repeated, then an answer came: the low, husky chatter of the ground-hog.

"All's lovely, and the fat goose hangs 'way up, pardner!" chuckled the transformed medicine-man, moving a little to the right, where one of the gray rocks seemed lifting from its ancient bed. "Keep your foot in the crack, cully, for I'm too tender a morsel to play jam under such a weighty cover as that!"

"Get under cover before you chin too much!" came a husky, but unmistakably white voice in return. "You might brass it out if those painted devils should smoke a trick, but we can't all of us play medicine-men!"

Red Leaf slipped through the opening thus offered, and the gray rock once more seemed immovable from the outside. There followed a bit of creeping, then a dull light grew before them, and in a few seconds more both Red Leaf and his guide stood erect in a dingy but fairly comfortable cave.

"Might be worse," laughed Red Leaf, casting a quick glance over the faces of those present, then around their limited quarters. "But if my red knaves only knew what a truly gorgeous palace their Messiah occupied, maybe they wouldn't marvel so much at his tarrying so long!"

"Oh, let up on that, Godfrey," growled the man who had given him admittance, at the same time drawing his broad shoulders together with a shiver as of cold. "You made me tarry too infernally long, with your signals! If you think it a joke to stand with naked body, or but an apology for a blanket around one-half of your torso, I'd like for you to change places with me, just once! Ugh! I feel as though the death-damp had crept into the marrow of my every bone!"

"How did the old thing work, Zeno?" asked one of the other men, who was packing an instrument into a blanket-lined case.

"Smooth as oil, and straight as a string! Couldn't have been better from our point of view."

"Then you haven't come here to kick?"

"I'd give a big round dollar if you were only a woman, Perkins, so I might show my appreciation by hugging and kissing you for your neat exhibition! As it is—"

"I'll take your word for it, mate," with a light laugh. "Then you caught your sucker?"

"Hooked him right through the gills, and every attempt to break away only made his killing the more certain!" with a low but vicious chuckle, his greenish-gray eyes filled with an unholy light.

"If it isn't a secret, Zeno, I'd like to know just why you hate this young Woodbridge so intensely?" slowly said the other, rising up from the case, his little eyes curiously scanning that painted visage by the dim light hard by.

"Then you'd be as wise as I am, Perk," laughed Red Leaf, moving forward and seating himself upon the box. "And yet—maybe! I've come over here, boys, more for a white man's chatter than anything else. I've played Injan so long I'm growing sick at the stomach!"

"Medicine to the medicine-man!" laughed Perkins, extending a hand in which rested a flat flask of liquor. "Buss the old girl, Godfrey, and then we'll play talk as long as your jaws can stand the pressure. Provided, of course, that there's no actual business waiting?"

"None that can't be postponed for an hour or so. Here's looking at ye, gentlemen!" nodded Red Leaf, drinking heartily.

The flask passed from hand to hand, until each one of the quartette had sampled its contents, then they settled down, smoking and talking after the fashion of old friends, making more than one strange revelation before the time drew near for parting.

The three men were all of white blood, beyond question, and far above the average so far as shrewdness went: of honesty, perhaps the less said the better.

Their speech was rough, and at times almost uncouth, but that came through associations, not lack of schooling. In fact, the trio had been selected from scores of other scholarly men, as being the best fitted by both nature

and teaching to fill the important parts assigned them.

Taking the three together, there was hardly an Indian dialect from one ocean to the other, from the Arctic Circle to the Gulf, which was not familiar to them, and which could not be glibly spoken by their tongues. And, through long practicing, their voices had grown so nearly alike that a change in speakers would pass unnoticed, so long as the eye was kept from telling the difference.

"And so the old girl fooled 'em all, did she, Zeno?" laughed Perkins, after their pipes were lighted and under headway. "I reckoned as much, when no circus was kicked up, but—one time, I just had to turn my cabeza for a squint at the back door, to see if all was clear for a skip-me-quick!"

"You filled the hole to perfection, Godfrey," nodded the one who had tacitly admitted playing the role of Indian Messiah, though his broad, strong face was now smooth as that of a child, or as a deftly-handled razor could make it.

"You mean when that fool boy called for a change of lingo?"

"Sure! That wasn't down in the programme, and I couldn't shift position enough to make out just which red he meant. You filled out the lack, just in time, but—like Perkins, I thought of the back door!"

"And I wondered if your medicine was powerful enough to save your crown from those red devils when they suspected the truth," laughed the third member of the trio. "Tears were starting, Godfrey!"

"Bah! I had only to blind the young cub, and if he had caught on, the Indian Messiah would surely have slain the doubter—through his favorite mouth-piece, Wah-pa-doo-tah, the Sioux! And—I almost wish the circus had broken forth, then and there!"

"What makes you hate young Woodbridge so bitterly, mate?"

"Tell you later, maybe, Perk. Just now there's better material for talk. And yet—I know you of old, mate! Once let you get a grip on a subject, and a bulldog can't begin to match you! So—you know I had a son?"

"Still had, haven't you?"

"Didn't I say *had*?" with an almost savage snarl in face and voice. "Silverblade helped the Border Beagle trap my boy, and Buck Horton took him across the line, into Canada, to answer for a bit of a racket over yonder. Then—Well, the case never came to trial. A gang broke into the jail, and—you can guess the rest!"

"Yet you let the cub live on?"

"Because I can punish him better than by instant death," with vicious energy. "Because I want him to join the hostiles, and play such a prominent part among them that he'll be a marked man from the send-off. Then, no matter how this ghost-dance business pans out, I'll have a death-grip on him, and on his family, as well. See the point?"

"Hardly clearly as might be, but if you don't like to say more, play we do," grunted Perkins, lazily.

"All right. You know what we're here for. You know what we're paid for doing, and you know who pays our wages. You know that if we succeed in hatching an Indian war, mighty good land will be cheaper than dirt, through all this region. Well, part of that country, just now, belongs to the father of Silverblade, the half-blood: as rich and productive a stock ranch as can be found in a long year's search!"

"And you've got your eye on that particular ranch, eh?"

"My eye now, my hands then! But enough of this. You're ready for a start, I see?"

"Just as soon as your Indian pets get a move on themselves, yes."

"That will be at peep o' day. You know where to strike for?"

"It's down on the list, and we'll get there, never fear," nodded he who had played the part of the Messiah. "And if everything is arranged as conveniently as this den, we'll have little trouble in working off another edition of the great miracle. So long as doubters only shoot at my reflection, I'll never howl!"

"You've got it down fine, for a fact! Well, we're paid big wages, and then there's the pickings to follow! Worth while playing ghost to order, isn't it mates?" laughed the false prophet. A chorus of laughter answered him back.

CHAPTER VI.

HOT HEART AGAINST COOL HEADS.

Two days later, another camp-fire was burning in a sheltered valley, many miles to the

northeast of the rocky range where the Indian Messiah appeared in answer to the prayers of Wah-pa-doo-tah, the great medicine-man of the Sioux.

Around that glowing pile were gathered the returning delegation, consisting of Grosventres, Shoshones, Crees and Bannocks; but there was no Medicine Lodge erected hard by, as then, and Red Leaf was no longer with his credulous dupes.

At first signs of dawn, on the morning after the vision, he had stepped forth from his tepee, and after his customary weird chant to the New Messiah, he had spoken plainly to his followers.

They had seen, they had heard, and now they must return to their people, to make glad other hearts with the glorious tidings. They knew the back-trail, and could easily follow it without the guidance given them in coming. For he, Wah-pa-doo-tah, the chosen mouth-piece of the Indian Messiah, had been given another message from the Great Spirit, and he must part from his loved children.

"There are many more to free from dust, many more hearts to pour bright light into, and Red Leaf must go to them. His children from the North have won the new gospel, and they can go preach the glad truth to their people. Keep bright the words of the Indian Messiah. Forget nothing that his lips uttered. Make your people see, even as *you* see, and lead them to where the mighty Sitting Bull awaits their coming. He will tell them what to do, when and where to strike the first blow."

Turning to Silverblade, the half-blood, who stood apart from the rest of the delegation, Red Leaf addressed him directly:

"And you, my son? Is the true light still burning?"

"It still burns, my father," humbly bowing his proud young head. "My heart is on fire! May I go, now? There are wings on my feet, and if they are forced to crawl, 'twill cause my brain to split open! May I go at once to the great Sitting Bull?"

"Ask the Messiah, and do as your heart bids," replied the prophet, turning abruptly away, lest the evil glow in his eyes betrayed too much of the truth for his own good.

So the parting came, and so the delegation mounted their horses and turned their faces homeward. They rode rapidly, for all seemed eager to reach their people, if only to lighten the glorious load which rested upon each and every mind. But, at each halting place, the Indians talked together, and, little by little, their talk began to take a course that caused Silverblade no little uneasiness.

Like all skeptics who have been converted after a long and hard struggle, Silverblade was now as eager to press on as he had been stubborn in hanging back. If he could have had his way, the delegation would have ridden night and day, or until their horses dropped dead beneath them. Other mounts might be bought or stolen, but the hours wasted in sleeping and eating could never be replaced.

But he was only a youth, and had not been among those chosen by the council to represent the Snake children. Only through the wish of Red Leaf, the prophet, had he been included among the delegation. And now that Red Leaf was away, the young half-blood found his voice of little power, when opposed to those of the three Shoshone chiefs.

As yet there had been no open rupture, though Silverblade was made, in more ways than one, to feel the jealousy inspired by his having been singled out by the Indian Messiah for a special message, on that never-to-be-forgotten night.

For one thing, as often as the half-blood urged his companions to greater speed, just so often would their pace slacken still more. It was hard to curb his hot passions, but, as time passed on, and he took more thought of what had really occurred, Silverblade felt that he could ill afford to openly quarrel with his companions.

He was an honest convert. He felt that it was his sacred duty, not only to offer himself as a sacrifice to the Messiah, but to win over the hearts and bodies of all his people as well.

He had conquered his first swift impulse to ride direct to the Sioux medicine-man, who was named as the chief representative on earth of the New Messiah. He had prayed to the being whom he now openly acknowledged his master, on earth as in heaven, but as yet he had been unable to interpret the answer given. And so, "eating his heart," he kept pace with the delegation, hoping for the best, yet forced to fear the worst.

Had Silverdale been less deeply impressed by that wondrous vision, his worldly eyes would have been opened far more quickly. As it was, this second night-camp was fated to lay bare the stunning truth.

Eating over, the Indians filled their pipes and gathered around the comfortable fire, as usual. Only the half-blood kept apart, pacing to and fro with pantherish restlessness.

All at once his attention was caught by words from the lips of Shooting Backward, the battle-scarred chief of the Grosventres.

"We are half-way to our people, brothers," he spoke, in the patois commonly used where members of different tribes were in council. "It is time to know what words our lips are to give, when questioned."

"Shooting Backward has been thinking deeply. He is very wise. He knows not how to talk foolish words. Can we do better than to take his thoughts for our own, my brothers?" slowly spoke one of the Bannocks.

"Let the war-chief tell his children what to say," added another of the Grosventres.

"What words are wiser than those let fall by the lips of the New Messiah?" asked the wily chief, glancing quickly around the circle. "And did he not say that the pale-faces should surely perish?"

"He said that many must perish, both white and red."

"Because they fell to fighting before his coming down to earth with the death-word on his lips," quickly amended the old chief, his sunken eyes glittering with a half-humorous light at his own reflections. "My ears caught those words, as well as yours, my brothers," with a dignified bow toward the last speaker. "But when other, wiser, and sweeter words came from the Messiah's lips, those were crowded out from my ears, and I let them lie, as too heavy to carry with ease."

"Shooting Backward is very old. His ears are not what they were when these trees were but little bushes. He may have heard wrongly, or he may get hold of the words by the wrong end, now he tries to draw them forth; but this is what the Messiah said in answer to his son, when Shooting Backward asked him questions: All pale-faces must perish when the Messiah comes; with a single word he will cause a mighty wave of melted rock to sweep over and swallow them up."

"Did the old man hear wrongly, brothers?"

"He heard aright! We caught the same words!"

"Good!" with a grim smile briefly lighting up his wrinkled visage. "If this is true—and the Indian Messiah knows not how to lie! If all this is true, why should we lead our people far from their homes, to fight, to suffer, to die?"

"Because the Messiah commands!" cried Silverblade, springing into the circle, his face aglow with strong emotion, his voice ringing with anger. "Because we have promised to obey our master! Because—"

"Peace!" sternly cried one of the Shoshones, lifting a clinched hand. "Wise men are in council, and there is more room for boys on the outside!"

"Are we children, and one-half white, that you dare scold us, son of Luke Woodbridge?" harshly chimed in the other Shoshone chief.

"Let the boy speak, my brothers," coldly interposed Shooting Backward. "Maybe we heard wrongly. Maybe Silverblade is wise enough to bring our feet back to the right trail."

"There is sore need of it!" flashed the youth, proudly facing those whom he had once deemed his friends, but upon whom he now looked as most dangerous enemies, not to himself, but to the great master whom they had sworn to serve in all truth and fidelity. "Have you so soon forgotten the pledge you gave to the Indian Messiah? Did he not bid us all return to our people, and open their dull eyes to the glorious truth? Did he not say that we must fight hard for victory over the pale-faces? That we must gather our braves and lead them to join our brethren of the South?"

"Wait, son of Weenamoo," quietly said Shooting Backward, lifting a skinny hand to calm the hot-heart. "You have ears, and they were open to the words of the Messiah. Surely you heard him say, what I have said, that at his coming, all pale-faces should perish?"

"And that all red-men who had died fighting for his cause, should be raised up to eternal life! Such were the words the Messiah spoke!"

"My ears heard them, son of Weenamoo," with a bow of assent. "When the white men died, the red-men were to live again. That is good—it is very good! But so are the other words good; that at his word, every one with

white blood in their veins, save those who had been turned all red through faith in their coming Messiah, must die the death."

"If one word is true, all words are true. And since the Messiah can and will do all this, without help from his weak children, like us, why should we lead our people so far away from home, now that the snow is coming with its freezing and its starvation?"

"Are these the words Shooting Backward means to give his people?" demanded Silverblade, with forced composure, though his eyes flashed hotly and his hands were clinched so fiercely that blood tinged his finger-nails.

"They are the words given by the Messiah. Shooting Backward will give his people time to think, before rushing blindly into great pain and suffering, for which there is no need."

Silverblade gazed at the speaker with such fire in his eyes, such fierce scorn in every feature, that the old chief involuntarily moved a hand toward the weapons at his middle. But then, with a gesture of mingled contempt and despair, the half-blood turned upon the oldest one of the Shoshones present.

"And you, Lean Bull? What words are your lips bearing to our people?"

"Lean Bull is a chief. He cannot hear the squalls of papposes, when he is seated with other wise men in council," coolly retorted the Shoshone.

"Speak, Lean Bull," mildly said Shooting Backward, that grim smile coming back to his withered visage. "Silverblade is young, but he was old enough for the Messiah to see him, though he stood among chiefs and mighty warriors. Speak, since Silverblade asks it."

"Shooting Backward has spoken, and his words are mine," sulkily growled the Shoshone.

"Lean Bull will tell his people the same. If the half-blood pappoose thinks his voice is loudest, let him stand up by the side of a chief, and our people will choose between us."

"And you, Feather-foot?" persisted Silverblade, turning to the last of his tribe there present. "What words will your lips form?"

"The same as those of my brother," with a bow toward Lean Bull. "Why should we fight, when all that we might gain by war will come to us without suffering on our part? The Messiah promised, and so it will surely be!"

For a few moments there was silence, during which Silverblade cast searching but now hopeless looks into each bronzed face about the camp-fire. He asked no further questions, for he could read the same decision in each face as he gazed.

He stepped outside the little circle, then faced them all, his clinched right hand lifting, his lithe figure drawn proudly erect, his black eyes seeming backed by living fire from his hot heart as he cried aloud:

"I have asked, and you have answered, mighty chieftains and most wise men! You have picked out a few words from the many let fall by the New Messiah, and cast all the rest away, as worthless! This is your faith, your belief, your fidelity! Then—this is Silverblade's!"

"He is but a youth, and his voice is too weak for his people to hear, when you all speak at the same time, but he is old enough to serve the Messiah, and old enough to perish while serving him!"

"Go back to your people, and advise them to crawl into holes and hide there until the great wave passes by! But if any ask where is Silverblade, who went forth with the great chiefs and wise men, tell them he has gone to join Sitting Bull, the mighty medicine-man of the Sioux! Tell them he is Silverblade, the Ghost Dancer, until the hour comes for fighting!" and without pausing for a reply, the half-blood sprung to his horse, mounted, and dashed furiously away through the night.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH.

"I tell you, men, you don't even begin to know the slippery devil! If you did, you'd nigh as soon turn him loose in a heap, as to give him even the ghost of a chance to slip his neck out o' the noose!"

"Kin he draw his head in, like a turtle, Tom?"

"Mebbe so he all same like spook?"

"Devil a bit the aither wan o' them!" broke in still another mocking voice, as a fiery-topped Milesian pushed to the front, a broad grin on his hairy phiz. "Sure, b'yes, it's invyin' the dumb baaste that he's afther; takin' the job av head-choker-in-chafe away, d'y' moind, now?"

The sun was just hiding itself from view, and the shadows were beginning to deepen there in that long, narrow valley, shut in on both sides

by saw-toothed ranges, too low to deserve the title of mountains, yet rather formidable-looking for mere hills.

As a rule, those hills were clothed with somber pines and other evergreens, given them a somber, even gloomy appearance, though their foliage remained untouched, while the first hard frosts of coming winter had killed more juicy leaves of the hard-wood trees along the course of the valley.

In a scattering clump of these, a rude camp had been pitched. Fires had been kindled, and at least one meal eaten hard by, as the debris gave ample evidence.

Here and there more than a score of horses were staked out, picking at the scanty grass, cured on the stem, or lazily browsing on such young wood as came within their limits.

One horse was far differently occupied, however, and around the spot where he stood, plainly centered the main interest.

That horse bore a rider, but plainly an unwilling one, for his arms were bound behind his back, a noose was fitted around his neck, the dingy line running upward to a stout limb of the tree near the base of which the animal stood.

An unwilling rider, as those grim preparations for an execution bore witness, but not a craven one.

A grim smile curled his lips as the doomed man caught the swift jests which followed the angry protest delivered by Tom Frinkle. Yet he knew that his sentence had been pronounced. He knew that little short of a miracle could save his life. Still, his unhampered lips could smile instead of bursting out with prayers for mercy, for life, for at least a few minutes' grace, that he might meet death with firmer hopes of salvation!

"You're right, Pat!" cried Tom Frinkle, smothering his fierce rage and forcing a smile more in tune with the grim pleasantry. "I do envy my horse, and who's got a better right? Who owes that pitiless bloodhound a deeper debt of vengeance than the brother of Morg. Frinkle?"

"That's all right, pardner," gruffly nodded a huge, broad-shouldered man of middle age, leaning carelessly against the trunk of a tree hard by. "There's mighty few of our kidney in these parts who have any cause for loving the gent on horseback. I don't, for one. But I'm in for letting him take his chances for a few hours, while we put in a few licks on our own account. If he's still in the saddle when we come back, why, that's another matter. You can play spur then, if you like."

"You'd leave him here alone, then?"

"With the nag: until they part company," laughed the big fellow. "Like master, like horse: and I'm betting odds that your critter'll catch us up before we hit the ranch, Frinkle."

"The critter might, but—where'd Buck Horton be?"

"Strung up to dry, of course!"

"Ow, the dandy bait that same'd make for hongry wolves, thin!"

"Hold!" sharply cried Tom Frinkle, with uplifted hand, his gaunt, dark face showing almost wolfish in the fire-glow. "Who laid the trap into which this bloodhound sneaked? Who was first to find out that the Border Beagle was on our trail?"

"You did, Tom, and we've given you full credit for it all, surely."

"And let you judge him, as well."

"When shootin' or knifin'd be mighty sight quicker over!" growled still another member of the party. "Hain't that 'nough fer a hog, even, that you keep still a-gruntin' fer more?"

"A love of hanging runs in the breed," sneered the man with a rope about his neck. "Morgan Frinkle fed that love until a noose closed about his throat, over in the Little Big Horn Valley. His brother, Tom Frinkle, will choke in the same style."

"And right there you have it, men!" harshly exploded the gaunt member, his face flushing until it looked nearly black in the deepening twilight. "This devil hung my brother! There were only the two of us left. I loved Morg. as few brothers ever loved, if I do say so myself. I would have given my life for his, at any hour, and a thousand times over, if such a sacrifice was possible. And yet—when his time of need came—I was too far away to help him out!"

"Because the valley was too small to support two horse-thieves of the Frinkle caliber," laughed the doomed man.

Tom Frinkle turned with a vicious snarl, one hand gripping his knife, as though longing to leap upon the Border Beagle and cut from his throat the tongue that dared mock his dead,

But then, fighting back his scorching passions, he spoke again:

"You hear him, pardners? Is *that* a man to leave even the ghost of a show for escaping? Is *he* one you can feel sure of killing, unless your own eyes take note of his last gasp and gurgle? I say no! I say that we'd be worse than fools, if we left him here, with a spark of life lingering in his foul carcass!"

"How can he get away, Tommy?" drawled the big knave, who seemed a prominent member, if indeed he was not the actual chief of that gang. "Even a devil couldn't break these cords on his arms. And if he should swing clear of the saddle, the noose'd only draw the tighter. Why, you're turning looney, Thomas!"

"I say no! I say that—wait a bit," swallowing his hot rage once more, forcing himself to calm, in outward seeming at least. "As I told you before, so I tell you now: you don't even begin to realize what manner of devil this Buck Horton really is! Fifty times he's laughed in the very face of death, yet here he is, laughing again!"

"At the hungry whine of a cowardly coyote—that's so, Tom Frinkle," mocked the man on horseback.

"Why, less than two months ago, to go no further back than that, mates, I saw Big Horn Buck in a fix that looked ten times as desperate as this, and even *I* felt that his death was only a question of minutes. Instead—he escaped *then*, and—"

"Clapped the darbies on the fellow who sentenced me, just as I'll serve you, Thomas!" broke in the dauntless prisoner.

"Bottle him up, Andy," nodded the giant, to one of his fellows. "What with his breaks, and Frinkle's chinning, it'll be next year before we know it. Plug his jaw, if you have to slit his cheeks from ear to ear in doing the job!"

"Rub it over the molasses-jug to take the bitter off, and I'll open up like a— Wide enough, pardner?" asked the doomed man as a monkey-like shape sprung up behind him, gag in hand.

His jaws opened freely, and in less than another minute Andy was at liberty to return to his former position.

"Now, Frinkle, say your say out, all in a lump. If you can show good cause for short shrift, all right. If not, the old law stands good."

"I'll hold you to that pledge, Darnell, and—here goes! It all happened up near the border, where a few of us were stirring up the red-skins with the ghost-dance racket, and at the same time making a grab for a pile of yellow-boys. You know Zeno Godfrey? Well, his son John was at our head, that trip, and there was a petticoat mixed up in the case, just to make it more binding."

"Boil it down, Thomas!" growled Darnell.

"Boil it down goes, captain, but I've got to sketch the background a bit before you can understand the main points of the picture. So—the girl was a half-blood, her mother daughter of the one-time war-chief of the Shoshones. Godfrey wanted her son, the girl's brother, to mix in the coming war, so he could have a better chance to win the girl and her father's big stock-ranch."

"Everything seemed working lovely, when this devil, Big Horn Buck Horton, the Border Beagle as people call him, chipped in. We nipped the fellow, together with a cowboy who was sweet on the girl, and Godfrey, like you, to-day, reckoned he'd put in a few fine touches, to torment the brain before destroying the body."

"It all seemed easy enough, and such a dead-sure thing, too, just as this looks to your eyes now! I kicked against delay, but Godfrey wouldn't hear to reason, and I had to stand back. What was the result?"

"That Big Horn Buck not only escaped with life, but jumped on our backs just when we felt we had the game won! He collared Godfrey, and run him across the line. He delivered him up to the law, but a mob gathered, broke into the jail and—Godfrey lost his light!"

"But that wasn't such a tight cinch as this."

"Think not? Let me tell you, then judge. We took the two fellows far away from any trail, or any chance of their being discovered by friends. We bucked and gagged them, both strung on a stout pole. This was lowered over a canyon, and fastened so the two men swung directly in front of a den where we knew a wounded mountain lion harbored, with a couple of half-grown cubs. She couldn't come out, without almost touching the bait. They were gagged so they couldn't scare her back by shouting, nor could they bring help by calling for it."

"I lay and watched them. I heard the lion snarling. I even saw her muzzle as she poked it out, to see what was up. With each moment

that passed, I expected to see her leap upon the bait, but—well, like *you*, Godfrey couldn't wait. Off he went, with a rush, on business! And so—the next we knew, Big Horn Buck was on our backs, instead of in the stomach of the lion!"

"And that's why I say—make sure work before you leave it! If we *know* that Buck Horton is dead, he can't come to make fresh trouble!"

"Why didn't you shoot him dead, then, when you had the drop?" growled Darnell, reluctant to yield, yet strongly impressed with that strange recital.

"Because I've sworn that he should die even as my brother died!" came the fierce retort. "He hung my brother, I must hang *him*! I ask it as a favor, captain, and you, gents,"

turning swiftly to that motley gathering of lawless knaves. "Let me prick up the horse, and laugh my fill for once, as I watch him kick—as my brother danced on air, at yonder devil's bidding! Let me—"

"All right, if you will have it that way, Frinkle," growled the chief, yielding at length.

"Hanging is hanging, and that's all you can make of it, after all!"

With a howl of fierce joy, the gaunt avenger sprung toward the horse, drawing his knife and cutting a thorny bush as he advanced. And gripping the thigh of the doomed man, checking a kick that was meant to drive him back, he snarled shrilly:

"You hear, Buck Horton? Your time has come! You're to hang, as my brother hanged! And I—even *I*—am to be your executioner!"

There was no reply in words. The snugly-fitting gag prevented that. But the Border Beagle flashed defiance with his big brown eyes, that spoke even plainer than empty words.

"A bit ago, you mocked at me when I spoke of my brother. You laughed because you had hanged *him*, and you swore that you'd hang *his* brother, after the same fashion. Does *this* look that way, Buck o' Big Horn?"

"It's a snug noose that fits your neck, Buck Horton. I know, for my hands did the job, and I own the lariat. It's a noble nag you're riding, Big Horn. I lent it to you, for just this once. And it's *my* saddle you're resting on. All is mine! And *you* are mine, too, Buck Horton, until I'm ready to turn you over to Satan!"

"I thought you were in such a mighty rush, Frinkle?" drawled Dave Darnell, moving a bit closer, his dull eyes beginning to glow with the strong interest his fellows were feeling long ere this.

"So I was, but that was when I feared you meant to cheat me out of my just dues," laughed the vicious knave, but stepping back and lifting the thorny sprout. "Ready, Big Horn Buck, the Border Beagle? Then—*go tell Satan I sent you to feed his hottest fires!*"

With those fierce words, Thomas Frinkle struck the uneasy horse a savage blow across the haunches, and with a wild snort of mingled pain and fright, the animal plunged forward in a mighty leap!

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OLD FRIEND, WELL MET.

As he delivered that blow, the signal for death as he firmly believed, Tom Frinkle leaped back and to one side, in order to avoid being struck by the body of the doomed detective, as the rope should jerk him out of the saddle.

But nothing of the kind took place!

Just as the thorn-bush started for the death-stroke, a bright object came flashing through the gloom, striking the lariat as it drew tight with the forward leap of the frightened horse—striking so surely, so firmly, that the tough fibers were severed almost to the last one: and these gave way as Big Horn Buck flung his head and body forward in the desperate hope of increasing the shock sufficiently to snap the spinal cord, thus winning painless death rather than wait through long minutes of slow suffocation!

That first long leap was swiftly followed by others, and before the astounded ruffians could realize what had taken place, the horse and its bound rider were fading from sight amid the shades of night, headed down the comparatively level valley.

Dave Darnell was first to rally, and with a howl of rage, he drew a revolver and leaped forward in chase, shooting as he ran. And close upon his heels trod Tom Frinkle, wild with fury, blindly working his pistols as he poured forth a flood of curses, hot enough to scorch any less seasoned throat.

All was confusion among the outlaws, but even had they been less thoroughly upset, they could hardly have taken in all that actually

occurred, so swift and dexterous was the performance.

As the tortured horse gave its second long leap, a dark figure rose up from cover, almost directly in its front. The creature shied a trifle, but sinewy hands gripped the shaggy bearskin at the cantle of the cowboy-saddle, and a quick spring carried their owner fairly across the animal's haunches. Then a pair of strong arms clasped the body of Big Horn Buck, and a familiar voice entered his keen ears:

"It's Silverblade, Horton! Sit fast, and we'll cheat the knaves even yet! We'll—Steady, boy!"

Lead was flying by this time, and the doubly-laden animal gave a spasmodic bound, as though one of the whistling missiles had found its billet; but instead of falling, the noble creature dashed on through the gloom at still greater speed.

"Bend over—make the mark as little as may be, Horton!" cried the young Shoshone, doing the same as far as the obstruction in front would admit, yet at the same time keeping his right hand busy.

"Mount, and chase!" thundered the hoarse voice of Dave Darnell, now left so far to the rear that only the spiteful flashes from his revolvers marked his position.

"We'll be ready for them when they catch up, never fear, old friend," grimly laughed Silverblade, rising erect and using the keen edge of his tomahawk on the rawhide thongs with which the arms of Buck Horton were hampered.

"Steady—so! And now—that gag!"

"Top-side up, and just in the nick of time, Davie, boy!" huskily muttered the rescued detective, as he spat out the gag. "How did you happen to be right—"

"Later, not now. We've got to take to the hills. One of those bullets struck this poor nag, and—"

"Struck him hard, too?" as the animal stumbled. "Look out, Davie!"

"To the left hand!" cried Silverblade, as he slipped over the animal's haunches, followed the next instant by Big Horn Buck, without attempting to check the horse in its unsteady stride.

With a swift leap, the half-blood was beside the detective, but Horton required no aid, though his sidelong leap caused him to stagger a bit as he struck the ground.

There was no time to waste in talk or deliberating over their wisest course to follow. From up the valley came angry yells and savage curses as the leaders pressed forward afoot, and from back of them came the confused trampling of many hoofs on the hard ground.

As already mentioned, the valley was narrow, and it took only a minute or two for the fugitives to reach the rising ground, and knowing that it could not be much longer before the disabled horse was discovered by the enemy, they hastily began the ascent, making their way over or around the many rocks, pressing through the stiff pines and other evergreens, rapidly gaining a point where they might feel fairly sure of escaping discovery, so long as the enemy confined their operations to the bed of the valley itself.

"You've got a gun to spare, Davie?" whispered Big Horn Buck, coming to a halt and facing the valley as he listened to the growing cries of the lawless gang at whose hands he had so nearly come by his death. "Good!" with a savage note as his extended hand came in contact with one of the heavy revolvers carried in the half-blood's belt. "Now let 'em come! Ten to one, but the Border Beagle's tired of running!"

"Peace, brother," whispered Silverblade, but drawing forth one of the pistols and resigning it to that eager grasp. "Why fight, when we can avoid it? They may not discover us, and—"

"But I'd rather they *would*, Davie, boy!" an unusual rancor in his tones, subdued though they were. "You saw how they had me trussed up, but you can't begin to know what all they made me suffer before that! I swore in my heart to get even, and now—"

"Silverblade saved your life, brother?"

"Don't I know it? And when—"

"Then pay back that debt, by doing as Silverblade asks, now," swiftly interposed the half-blood. "If we must fight or die, then fight we will, as true braves should; but let us not be first to shed blood."

"You talk like an Injun, Davie, but it don't sound that way in my ears! Surely, you've not turned missionary, lad?"

A hand flashed across his lips, at that, but no explanation was needed. That came from the valley before then, and not so many rods below the point where they had abandoned the wounded horse.

"All eyes open, lads!" came the loud, fierce tones of Dave Darnell. "Here's the boss—crippled—look out for the Beagle!"

"Look out for both!" howled Tom Frinkle, shrilly. "The rope was cut! I saw the knife fall! Kill the thrower, but take Horton alive!"

"That sounds like love thy brother, even as thyself, doesn't it?" muttered the border detective, with a low, bitter laugh. "Wouldn't you just love to hug yonder rascal, David Woodbridge?"

"David Woodbridge is dead. I am Silverblade, the Ghost Dancer."

"A hostile, yet you talk of sparing the lives of your enemies?" an incredulous echo in his subdued tones. "For they are your enemies now, Davie, even as they have been mine all along. They'll never forgive you pulling me out of the noose, back yonder!"

Silverblade touched an arm, whispering lowly as he turned from the valley toward the rocky expanse above and beyond them:

"Come, brother. It is safer, up yonder. They will soon be climbing up here, and bloodshed is not good when it can be avoided. If I, an Indian, can hold back my hand, surely you, a white man, ought to be as merciful! Come, brother: he whose knife cut the rope, asks it."

Almost any other appeal would have failed, but that death-moment was still too near at hand for even the fiercely angry detective to refuse. And so, making as little noise as possible, the two men increased their distance from the savagely cursing gang.

Long before this, both footmen and those on horses, had come upon the scene, and reading at least part of the truth in the badly-crippled condition of the horse, already keen eyes were searching for the fugitives. For now, that they had time to collect their scattered wits, one and all knew that Big Horn Buck had been rescued from the rope by a friend.

"Ready to fire at a flash, boys!" harshly cried Dave Darnell, as he gained a point several rods beyond where they had come upon the crippled horse. "Here's a damp stretch, and if they've took leg-bail, I'll mighty soon find it out! Ready—eyes on every side, now!"

Striking a match, the giant outlaw lit a fire-ball, and holding this close to the ground, he passed quickly in zig-zags from side to side of the narrow valley, looking for a trail. But long before he could have fully satisfied all doubt in this manner, a shrill cry broke from the lips of Tom Frinkle.

"This way, boys! They've taken to the rocks! Now we have got 'em!"

That fiercely exultant outburst was deliberately invited by the Border Beagle.

He had yielded to the strange appeal made by Silverblade, because he owed him far too weighty a debt to refuse what was asked as a personal favor. But he was resolved to let the gang have at least an inkling of his present whereabouts, for reasons which he held in reserve for the time being.

When nearly half-way to the rocky crest, the two friends came to a halt once more, crouching in the shadow cast by a pine tree, watching the movements of Dave Darnell as he searched the valley by the red glow of his fire-ball.

For several minutes they remained thus, making keen ears do the service which darkness denied their eyes, and as they waited, the hot passions of the detective gradually cooled down. Not that he lost all thirst for vengeance; he had suffered far too much during the few hours Tom Frinkle and his hardly less vile associates had held him in their pitiless grip. But he began to see that there was a wiser, surer method of punishing the criminals than by meeting them in open fight, with the odds of ten to one against the right, even counting in Silverblade.

Still, while resigning all thought of bringing on a pitched battle, Horton resolved to let his enemies know that he had not sought safety in headlong flight, as the majority of the gang evidently fancied.

With this end in view, he felt around in the darkness beneath the pine tree, until his fingers closed upon a loose stone, weighing several pounds. And then, giving a low hiss as warning to Silverblade, the border detective flung the stone to the left, and down the hill. The missile struck upon a bare rock with a sharp concussion, bounding off to rattle through a scrubby pine, making sound enough to draw that shrill yell of vicious triumph from the lips of Tom Frinkle.

At that cry, Silverblade sprang erect, giving a curious gasp, much as though he had cast aside a crushing burden, and for the first time could breathe freely.

"Good!" he hissed, almost savagely, hands at

his belt of arms. "It is done and now—we must fight!"

Other yells were answering back that call from Tom Frinkle, and there was a hasty scramble among the rocks and bushes toward the spot where the suspicious sound had arisen. And under cover of all this, Big Horn Buck grasped the half-blood by an arm, whispering:

"Hold, David! A bit ago you were crazy to avoid a fight, but now—"

"I was David, then, but now I am Silverblade! We will drink their blood while a drop remains in their veins! We will—"

"Do nothing of the kind, hot-head!" sternly muttered Horton, his grip tightening. "I was mad, then, and you were the sane one. Now I am myself again, must you turn wild? I say—no fighting, boy!"

"Why did you cast that stone, then?" almost sulkily muttered the half-blood, his young muscles quivering under that firm grip.

"To keep those imps nosing about these rocks, of course," his voice softening a bit, but his grasp remaining on that nervous arm, as he silently shifted position, heading away from the searching gang, and picking his way toward the head of the valley.

"Come, Davie; I'll make all clear to you, as soon as we're fairly beyond earshot of yonder coyotes."

"I would rather fight, now that I see blood before my eyes!"

"You'll have fighting enough before long, unless I miss my guess widely," was the grim whisper.

After that Silverblade said nothing until they had stolen away several hundred yards: equal to a full mile under the light of the sun, with darkness and so many snug coverts all around them.

"What does my brother intend doing, now?" at length asked the half-blood, as Horton paused for a backward glance and bit of listening.

"Get my weapons, of course," with a low but grim laugh. "A man might as well be without a head as unarmed, in these parts. I'll keep your gun as a temporary loan, but those knaves owe me a full outfit, and I mean to make them pay their debts that far, at the very least," said Horton, then silently stealing forward once more.

CHAPTER IX.

PLAYING WITH THE ENEMY.

MAKING as little noise as possible, and keeping covered by rocks or bushes, or the still deeper shadows cast by the taller evergreens, the two friends picked their way along the uneven side of the range, heading for the spot where one of their number had so nearly met his death at the hands of his bitterest enemy.

The night was still hardly born, but even this early the twinkling stars from the unclouded vault gave forth a degree of light quite sufficient to suit the present wishes of the Border Beagle. Enough to keep him from making any awkward misstep, or other blundering move by which the dangerous attention of that lawless gang might be drawn to their movements. Enough to warn his keen eyes of lurking watcher, in case the enemy had been shrewd enough to leave a camp-guard on duty.

Big Horn Buck was not so very long in gaining a position from whence he could peer down upon the camp, where the two fires were still burning, freely enough to cast a ruddy glow along the ground beneath those scattered trees.

"All eyes open, Davie," he muttered, as he came to a halt, keeping under cover, yet where a fair prospect spread out before them. "Look for two-legged whelps, and if you spot any such on watch, give me a pinch hard enough to make me forget how to cuss loud!"

"Why should they keep watch here?" came from the half-blood, in the same guarded tones. "How could they think that the Border Beagle would come back for the rest of the *riata*?"

"Does look kind o' rocky, don't it?" with a soft chuckle. "Still, some of 'em might be just such fools as to think it, and lay low on the odd chance of turning 'think' into 'know.' And you, Davie?"

"What else? There are no scalps yonder!"

The words had scarcely passed his lips when fresh cries burst forth from lower down the narrow valley, the precise nature of which was not so easy to determine.

"Sounds wild-catty enough, but we're up here; I hardly reckon the imps have found us. It don't seem likely that any other honest outfit was circulating there or thereabouts, just in time to get nipped by the hungry jaws: eh, Davie?"

Silverblade made no suggestion. He stood with inclined head, trying to read the whole truth through his sense of hearing.

After that first outcry, fierce and venomous enough it sounded, too, there came a sudden lull of brief duration. Then the single voice of Dave Darnell, softened by the considerable distance, yet readily distinguishable as that of the giant leader of the gang.

Even their keen ears could catch no word, and they could only give a vague guess at the meaning of that sudden outburst.

"Let 'em howl, if it does 'em any good," grunted the Border Beagle, whose gaze had hardly wandered from the lighted spot further up the narrow valley. "Keep one eye down that way, Davie, for the imps may have struck off our double and—Steady, lad!"

The break was mechanical, the words meaning nothing, for Silverblade had not stirred a muscle to draw forth such an ejaculation.

One of the larger logs composing the body of the nearest fire, just then broke in two pieces, and as a bright blaze sprang up at the fracture, the increased light showed Big Horn Buck one of the objects for which his eyes were searching. Showing darkly against the weather-bleached trunk of the tree against which Dave Darnell had leaned while listening to the sanguinary plea put forth by Tom Frinkle, he could distinguish an irregularly shaped blotch.

"Steady, Davie!" he repeated, in a whisper, one hand touching the half-blood, while with the other he pointed at that dark spot. "Sight along my finger—so! See that bunch of something?"

"What is it?"

"Part of my property, and I'm going to reclaim it," laughed the Border Beagle, lowering his hand, to grip the pistol loaned him by the youthful Shoshone. "Come a bit nearer, then you can stand guard while I go after it. Understand?"

"I remember, now," nodded Silverblade, following after the detective. "Your belt of arms. I saw them hanging there, as I crept around to be in line when the horse started, but I never gave them another thought."

"Why should you? You had enough on hand, without—I'll try to thank you, when I get a bit more time, Davie, lad."

"Why waste breath? Silverblade saw a friend in trouble. He did the best he knew how. It is done, now let it be forgotten."

"If I didn't know better, Davie, I'd be tempted to swear you were a genuine red-skin, just from your talk!" muttered Horton, turning to cast a curious glance into the face of the half-blood.

"I am *all* red, now, though you knew me when I was half white. Silverblade is seen and heard. His old doubts are brushed away, never more to darken his brain and turn his heart sick. There is no David Woodbridge, for the boy you knew by that name has become a man, and his name is Silverblade, the Ghost Dancer!"

Buck Horton maintaining his searching gaze throughout that cold, yet resolute speech, both seeming to forget the perils which still menaced them. But as the half-blood ceased speaking, the older man gave a shrug of his shoulders as he once more faced toward the seemingly deserted camp-ground on the lower level.

"Silverblade it is, then, until there's more room to talk it over; but you can't choke me off from calling you pard, or from trusting you to even-up if a sulker should be lying in wait to pop me over as I go for my outfit, yonder."

"We will both go, brother," said Silverblade, gliding forward. "With cover so plenty, it will be easy enough to cheat even the eyes of an enemy, if any such be on guard."

Feeling that too much time had already been lost in useless talk, and beginning to realize that the half-blood, boy as he was wont to regard him, had altered enough to render even a friendly argument a question of doubt, so far as the outcome was concerned, Horton said no more, but bent all his energies toward recovering his belt of arms.

They had formed part of the profits of that important capture, and as the only one who could fairly claim them as being his chief captor, Tom Frinkle, had scorned to take advantage of the fact, in his vicious triumph at the prospect of avenging the death of his brother, Dave Darnell had hung up the belt with its equipment, the lucky owner to be decided by lot as soon as the prisoner had paid the penalty.

Moving rapidly, yet keeping well covered throughout, the two pards pressed onward and downward, pausing to listen intently when they

finally touched the level, only a few rods from the two fires.

The only sound that came to their ears from the immediate vicinity was the light stroke of a hoof, as a horse gave an idle stamp. And then Buck Horton, keeping that tree-trunk in line with the fires, glided swiftly forward, to pause again with his figure blending with the gray bole.

Still no suspicious sound, and passing around the tree, he grasped the belt of arms, flashing a keen glance around as his right hand came half-way to a level, forefinger on the trigger.

"I reckon it's all clear sailing, pardner," he said, a moment later.

"There are three horses here," came the voice of the half-blood, but from a quarter almost directly opposite that in which Horton looked for a reply. "If one should suit my brother—"

"How did you—let's have a look at 'em," abruptly breaking off, but with a better opinion of the half-blood's capacity than he had up to that instant entertained; for this was his first intimation that Silverblade had stirred from the rock behind which he had left him crouching, only a brief space before.

It was as the Shoshone said: there were three horses left at picket by the enemy in their mad chase, but a single glance told the Border Beagle that neither one of the trio belonged to him.

"I'm too old in the business to turn horse-thief now, pardner," he said, with a short, hard laugh, as he turned away from the uneasy animals. "I'll have my own nag, or kick up a precious racket while failing. And—I reckon he's coming, right now!"

From down the valley came the clatter of many hoofs, striking echoes out of the flinty soil, and touching Silverblade on an arm, Big Horn Buck glided across the valley, crouching down under cover, far enough away to be in little danger of discovery without an actual search, yet near enough to the camp-fires to both see and hear.

They were not kept long in suspense, for Dave Darnell and a dozen others came trotting into view, the giant growling harshly as he swung himself out of the saddle near one of the fires.

"Devil fly away with 'em all, say I! 'Twas all I could do to keep my knife from his throat! Only for *him*—Why couldn't he be satisfied with bullet or steel? Then, all would have been right, and the Border Beagle would have yelped along the death-trail, if any!"

"Mebbe Tom'll ketch the critter, even yit, boss."

"I hope he may, and his death at the same time! What right had he to run any—Who's cribbed those tools?" his voice deepening to a hoarse snarl of hot rage as he stared at the tree where the belt of arms had been left hanging. "Who's dared touch—Fire and fury! Ten to one that devil has rounded on us and armed himself!"

Big Horn Buck nudged Silverblade with an elbow, a silent but hearty grin on his bronzed face as he took notes. And it was enough to make even a modest man feel proud, just to see how those dozen knaves shrunk and cowered as they flashed uneasy looks around in quest of a single man. Only one, yet that one was the Border Beagle, and with his hands fully armed, he was one to be dreaded.

"Stop! no come—spoil trail, mebbe so!" grunted an Indian, then snatching up a blazing brand from the nearest fire, and springing with it to the base of the tree to which the missing arms had been fastened.

"Stand back, all!" commanded Dave Darnell, catching at the idea. "Let the Injun work, and if—You howled because I drew you off a blind trail, down yonder, lads, but how now? If Buck Horton has come back to arm himself, what comes next? Curse the tongues that wagged so freely before such ears! And yet—What is it, Injun?"

"He come, sure!" nodded the red-skin, glancing up. "Dis he heel—mek like so!" turning slowly around to sweep all sides with his glittering eyes. "Big Horn git guns. Look fo' fight, mebbe. Mebbe hear um holler; dat way, when cap'n choke off."

Mebbe the red buck is getting the thing down just a mite too fine for our health, Davie!" whispered the Border Beagle, pausing for no more, but moving silently away, after touching Silverblade on the arm as a signal to follow.

They passed out of sight and hearing in a short space, and then the half-blood took time to whisper:

"What comes next, brother?"

"I've got my guns—here's the one you loaned me, by the way," as his hand went back to meet

that of the young Shoshone. "Thanks, my boy! Now I'll neither borrow nor lend, as the good woman had it!"

"Is this a time or place for laughing, brother?" sternly muttered Silverblade, moving forward until they were abreast.

"Well, a man don't cheat death by such a narrow margin every day, Davie, and I'm just bubbling over with fun! This playing with the hounds makes me feel as gay as a dog-fox in March, but if you want to get right down to sober business, all right. You asked—what next? My horse, of course!"

"It is down this way, then?"

"It *must* be, for none of those fellows rode it back, and we didn't find it staked out. I only hope we'll find Tom Frinkle acting as horse-guard, pard!"

"You will lift his scalp?"

"And both head and carcass along with it! Didn't you hear me tell the rascal that I'd serve him just as I served John Godfrey? All right lad. I hear and see, too!"

By this time the two friends had covered considerable distance, and were now not far from the spot where they had abandoned the crippled horse, to take to the rocks rising from the edge of the valley. And there, dimly visible by the starlight, aided in a slight degree by the rising moon, though its face was still hidden by the eastern hills, they caught sight of several horses standing in a little clump.

At the same time there came a harsh call from among the rocks.

"What is it over there; found anything?"

"Jest a tumble, an' I ketched it on the shin o' me—wuss luck!"

CHAPTER X.

SILVERBLADE DECLARES HIMSELF.

"I'll put a golden salve all over it, if we catch that devil of a Big Horn!" added the first speaker, beyond a doubt none other than Tom Frinkle himself. "Don't throw away a single chance, boys! I know he *must* be in hiding, for we pressed him too mighty close to give him a chance to steal away without being heard, after letting that rock slip under his hoof! Find him! We've got to find him!"

"Durned sight easier said than done, I'm doubtin', pard!"

"But we'll come out on top, if you only do your duty as I do mine! Stick to your knitting, boys, and I'll see that you don't lose anything by it. I'll pay you your price, if it makes me a beggar for the rest of my life!"

"That's white, an' my name is Stick-tight, pardner!" laughed the other rascal, once more moving ahead.

On that clear, frosty night, each word spoken came distinctly to the ears of the two partners, as they crouched under cover, waiting, watching, and listening. At the last words, Big Horn Buck chuckled softly, for he could enjoy that blind search far more than the chief enemy was doing.

"They are fools," muttered Silverblade, in strong contempt. "If they really wish to find, why yelp on a blind trail so loudly?"

"To give Big Horn a chance to run away, I reckon," grinned the owner of that title, then noiselessly shifting his location until his keen eyes caught sight of an armed man acting as horse-guard. "They're not *all* such fools, though! They've tried to make sure I don't double back and lift four legs to spell my pair of trotters!"

"Shall Silverblade tie his tongue—with *this*?" came in a low, hissing whisper, as the youth lifted a bare blade before the eyes of his companion.

"No. That's too Injuny for my stomach, if we can get along with anything milder. Stay here, and I'll sing a sleepy song in the fellow's ears. I say—*stay here*!" his whisper turning stern as the Shoshone made an impatient gesture.

Without waiting for argument, Buck Horton swiftly crept from cover and passed further into the narrow valley, then rising to his feet and trotting forward like one coming from the main force above.

"Stiddy, thar!" the horse-guard sternly cried, turning at the first patter of feet, his rifle dropping to a level as he added: "Show up, or go down, fer keeps, critter!"

"Agh! g'way wid ye, man!" cried the Border Beagle, copying the very accent of the red-headed Irishman, together with his voice. "Shoot the devil's grandmother, av ye loiike, but—"

"What is it, Nuckolls?" came the shrill voice of Tom Frinkle, from high up among the rocks.

"Irish Pat, who wants—what *do* ye want, anyway?"

"Divil a wan o' me wants the loikes av ye, ould knuckle o' baafe, annyway," retorted the counterfeit Milesian, rapidly advancing toward the horse-guard, whose rifle was shifting to its former position, now that his first suspicions faded away. "It's the cap'n wants—*down ye go, if you were as big as a mountain!*"

Near enough for one long leap to carry him within stroke, and fearing lest the horse-guard discover the imposition if he ventured any further as a genuine messenger would move, Big Horn Buck shot forward, his right fist in advance, his left hand making a grasp at the Winchester.

A neater blow was never dealt, in the "squared circle," or outside of it, and the stalwart horse guard went down before that hard bunch of bones without even a gasp or a groan. But—worse luck!

The Winchester escaped that quick clutch, and turning over as it flew back behind its owner, the hammer struck a rock and the weapon exploded with an echoing crash!

Instant cries came from the searchers among the rocks, and knowing that further caution would be worse than wasted, Big Horn Buck cried aloud as he sprung forward and grasped the knot of horses:

"This way, pard! Who's fool enough to hoof it, when horseflesh comes so cheaply?"

"Down, men!" fairly shrieked Tom Frinkle, recognizing that mocking voice, and sending a stream of lead before him as he plunged recklessly toward the valley. "It's the Border Beagle and—"

"Good-night, Tommy!" mocked Horton, leaping into the saddle which his own horse bore upon its back. "Take care of your neck, for I've got a mortgage on it!"

Silverblade came with a rush, and leaping upon one of the horses, he sent the others ahead of them down the valley, lending them spurs in his wild, chilling yells.

The bullets whistled viciously around, but it was blind shooting on the part of the enemy. The light was dim, they did not pause to steady their aim, and the mark was in swift motion. It was a waste of good ammunition, so far as bringing down their game was concerned, but the wild racket thus kicked up was sufficient to bring the rest of the gang to the rescue.

The two pards did not wait for that, as a matter of course. They were armed and well mounted. Their enemies were all behind them, and what more natural than that they should make all haste to win the perfect security that surely lay ahead of them?

But before a mile of the valley was passed over, the two pards slackened their pace, as though from the same impulse.

"What is it, Davie, asked Horton, leaning a bit nearer the Shoshone, the better to read his face by the rays of the moon, just now coming into view over the top of the eastern range.

"One horse is enough for Silverblade, and he has a better than this, cached in the hills, back yonder. Big Horn can take this."

"And you, David?"

"There is no David here. I am Silverblade, the Ghost Dancer."

"Haven't you got rid of that bee, lad? Surely you don't—Never mind!" turning to the right hand as a side-pass showed itself by the light of the moon. "We'll let those imps follow the strays, if they see fit, pardner. Come! You and I must have a bit of a powwow, and I've got the proper cover mapped out in this noggin of mine."

Silverblade seemed to hesitate, like one in doubt, but when Horton bent over to grasp his reins, he said:

"Since my brother wishes it, so let it be. Lead on. Silverblade will follow. After all, there is a time when talk is good and wise. *This* may be a time like that."

"I'll do my level best to make it so, anyway," with quiet resolution in his tones as they turned into the pass. "Whereabouts did you cache your horse, Silverblade?"

"I will lead the way there, if my brother thinks best."

"All right. If we need to move from there, I reckon we'll find a way open."

For some little time they pressed on in silence. A restraint seemed to have fallen over them both, and Big Horn Buck kept close watch over his youthful companion, like one who more than half expects an attempt to break away.

But nothing of the sort took place, and at length the point for which they were heading came into view, as a gesture by the half-blood plainly signified. And having made this sign,

he alighted, turning the horse loose to wander at will.

"I'll just slip the bridle, so it can feed without risk of getting head-fast," muttered Horton, suiting the action to his words. "Your nag is in yonder, then, Davie?"

"Why does my brother call the Shoshone out of his name?" coldly demanded Silverblade, facing the detective with glowing eyes. "There may once have been a David Woodbridge, but he is dead, and from his ashes has risen a Shoshone brave, every drop of whose blood is red, and free from white blood as that which gives life and strength to the Indian Messiah himself."

"You surely are not carried away by that foolish craze, boy?"

Silverblade reached out a hand, to touch an arm, then said:

"One of us two is foolish, but it is not the son of Weenamoo. If my white brother doubts the truth of my words, he has but to listen to the true words Silverblade stands ready to speak in his ears."

"All right, pardner, if you'll just come a bit further, first. We can catch a glimpse of the valley from those rocks, or I'm off in my guess. I want to hear what you have to say, but I also want to see if those rascals will stick to the old scheme. Will you come?"

For answer, Silverblade led the way until they were where they could look down into the valley, though they could see little but darkness, save where the deserted camp-fires still cast out a red glow.

Without waiting to be questioned, Silverblade rapidly but clearly told the full tale of his pilgrimage to the Indian Messiah, under the guidance of Wab-pa-doo-tab, the medicine-man of the Sioux. And after describing that wondrous vision, and repeating the words of the spectral figure, he added:

"This is what the Shoshone heard, this what he saw! Now—can you ask why I believe? Can you still say that this is no more than a foolish craze?"

"First, do you know who and what this Wab-pa-doo-tab really is?"

"A prophet, and the mouth-piece of the Indian Messiah!"

"Then the Messiah is mighty hard up for good material to make his salvation trumpets out of! I know Red Leaf, and you once knew his son, David Woodbridge. John Godfrey was that son, and Red Leaf is Zeno Godfrey, with a round dozen prices hanging over his head!"

"That is hard to believe, brother," slowly spoke the half-blood. "Still, I will not give you the lie. Silverblade was once all white, all hard of heart and full of scoffing. The Messiah reached down and touched his heart with a merciful finger, and now he is a believer! Now he is going to join Sitting Bull, the chosen representative of the Great Spirit on earth!"

"You are mad, boy!" harshly growled the detective. "If you go to that scheming demon, you go to your death!"

"If so, it is so written. If Silverblade falls in the fight, he knows that he will live again, when the Messiah speaks!"

"Hark!" as the confused rumble of far-away hoof-strokes came floating up the valley to their ears. "Those rascals are coming back, to—one word, first, David Woodbridge, or Silverblade, since you will have it that way! You said your Messiah cursed all the whites, all the Indians who proved true to their salt?"

"No! The true and faithful were to be saved, but the false ones were to perish!"

"Different terms for the same thing," with a short, bitter laugh. "We both mean the Friendlies. All right, Silverblade! You hear those devils coming, hot-foot? They are going to make a raid upon a peaceful family of those very Friendlies, before I can warn them. Why don't you mount and join them in their bloody work?"

CHAPTER XI.

PLUNDER IF NOT REVENGE.

TOM FRINKLE was first to reach the valley after that alarm broke forth, but he acted more like a lunatic than a wise man, and the friend who chanced to stand before him just then, would have fared little better than an enemy. He was fairly wild, and growing wilder with each passing moment, for with them came the swiftly falling hoof-strokes, and on their wings were borne the mocking laughter of his hated foe.

For the second time that night he was chasing his prey without the faintest chance of overtaking it. But now, as then, he plunged blindly along the shadowed valley, working his guns until they refused to talk louder than a whisper.

His mates were less headlong, for they were beginning to form a very respectable opinion of this Border Beagle, who laughed at death and mocked its executioners.

Of course they would "take him," dead or alive, if once the slippery knave was cornered; but that was the trouble! Just when they thought they had him, he turned up somewhere else!

Two of the men followed after Frinkle, though they were already beginning to realize how foolish such an unequal race must be, but as one of the others caught sight of the fallen horse-guard, he slackened his rush and called aloud:

"Hyar, boys! Nuckolls needs—I say, pardner!"

But Nuckolls was beyond saying, for the present, and the hand which was caught up by the outlaw, fell heavy as lead as those fingers unclosed as the rapid clatter of hoofs came from up the valley.

"Kiver, boys!" the fellow quavered, seeing an enemy in every shadow, and hearing another in every sound.

"Kiver be durned! It's the cap'n comin' back, an'—head up, boy Nuck! Ef ye're dead, why don't ye say so?"

There was hardly time for the trio of knaves to shout forth a friendly warning and greeting before Dave Darnell and his men came sweeping down the valley, drawn back by that wild alarm. The loss of a score of moments in making their meaning known, would have made all the difference between life and death, at least to the senseless horse-guard. As it was, the excited giant swung his hand a few feet to the right of where that figure lay, reining in barely long enough for a word of hasty explanation.

"Doubled on us all, boss!" spluttered one of those who had elected to remain with Tom Frinkle when the split came. "Laid out Nuckolls as stood horse-guard, then up an' stampeded what they didn't straddle!"

"Who was it?—quick!"

"The Border Beagle, or I've done lost my ear fer music, boss!"

"Come on, boys!" howled the giant, sending his steed forward with spur and rein-ends.

"We've got to rope him, or—just got to!"

Dave Darnell fully meant what he said, but even a thoroughbred knave must occasionally lose his grip, and this was the big fellow's off-night.

He caught up with and passed Tom Frinkle, who seemed tireless in his fury of excitement. He had lang-power to keep him in swift motion, with surplus breath to spend in cursing at every stride.

"Rope him! Nail him alive, for me, and I'll be your nigger for life, cap'n!" he fairly shrieked after the giant as the mounted party swept past.

"I'll hang him, and tie you to his heels as a neck-breaker!" was the harsh retort; but even this quickly Dave Darnell was beginning to see how little chance there really remained for them to pick up Big Horn Buck, now that he was in the saddle, and with other animals to give him a change whenever wanted.

There came a few breathless moments, not long after, when the neigh of a horse came clearly up the valley. Guns were cocked and nerves strained for the hot encounter, but before a shot was fired, the truth made itself known.

"It's our nags!" Darnell cried out, hoarsely, as a riderless steed came to his side as he involuntarily tightened his reins. "Eyes open! They've taken to the rocks again!"

But that belief lasted only a short time. The rejected horses had kept together, maintaining their mad pace only a short time after Silverblade ceased to spur them on with his yells. They were picked up, and all accounted for but two; one belonging to Nuckolls, and the other that from whose back Big Horn Buck had been jerked by the deftly-cast lasso in the hands of Tom Frinkle.

"I reckon that does settle it!" sulkily growled Dave Darnell, when this conclusion was reached. "If he didn't just know he had the edge over us, would Big Horn let go a shift, like this? Devil roast Tom Frinkle, along with his brother! Only for him, we'd have none o' this bother, and by this time be playing circus over the range!"

The Indian who had so quickly named the man who secured the belt of arms at the deserted camp, now proved himself equally as expert in scouting. He had manufactured a small light, and rapidly searching the valley below where the stampeded animals had been found, now came back to report that no horses, ridden or free, had passed down beyond that point.

Tom Frinkle came pantingly along, just in time to catch this report, and found breath

enough to speak of the side-pass which he had noted while running down the valley.

"I reckoned then they'd turned in there, and now I know it!"

"Let 'em turn, and be cursed!" growled Darnell, remounting his horse. "I hope they have, if you're fool enough to think of chasing 'em any further this night, Tom Frinkle! And I hope they're laying for a fellow just like you! You're too mighty smart to live in a common world like this—you are!"

That seemed a case of "rubbing it in," for the lank avenger was too nearly exhausted to fight, and he knew that an angry retort would amount to just that. So, as Darnell wheeled and trotted briskly up the valley, Frinkle climbed into one of the empty saddles, and followed.

Still, Darnell drew rein when at the side-pass, and once more the Indian trailer gave a sample of his skill. With only the moonlight to aid his eyes, he declared that two horsemen had turned into the pass.

"Never mind looking closer, Injun," growled Darnell, as the savago almost brushed the ground with his sharp nose. "It was Big Horn, of course, and the devil who helped set him free."

"Big Horn boss, sure!" grunted the trailer, leaving the spoor with evident reluctance. "Me know dat. Me know hoss, by hoof."

"And that's the demon you helped cheat death by sticking out for a hanging, Tom Frinkle!" snarled Darnell, turning toward the avenger. "Can't you guess why he turned aside here? Can't you figure it out why he didn't keep straight ahead, when he had such a sure start?"

"You reckon he—could he have heard what we talked over?"

"Of course he heard, and I'm betting my head against yours—and I can't think of no longer odds!" with a coarse, ugly laugh. "I'm betting my head against yours, Tom Frinkle, that he's making a circle in hopes of getting there in time to tell 'em we're coming!"

"If I could only know it was so!"

"I know it, and so would you if you had a grain of sense left!"

"Then—there may be a chance, even yet!" with fierce excitement in voice and face, as he set his horse in motion up the main valley. "We can get there first, and if he does come up, we can nab him!"

"Kill him, you mean," as he forged to the head once more. "Kill him on sight, and if you howl for a hanging, by the devil we serve! I'll fit you out as the airy dancer, Tom Frinkle!"

Thus it came about that the two men on the crest of the range, both heard and saw the lawless gang coming back to their camp-grounds, where a halt was called by Dave Darnell, long enough to gather up their traps and better prepare for the ride which lay before them.

"Just one word with you, Frinkle, before we make a break. Are you all crazy, or can you play half-white for a few hours?"

"I reckon I was crazy, cap'n," submissively muttered the lank rascal, with a sickly smile, but meeting that frowning gaze without flinching. "But it's working off, and I begin to see that you're in the right of it."

"What do you see?"

"That we haven't any of us acted any too wisely, if you'll not kick at the rub, cap'n. It looked a dead sure cinch on Big Horn, but we had no call to tell him all about what we had laid out to do. He gave no signs of hearing, of course, but that makes it all the more likely he was cool enough to take notes. If so—well, he'll try to warn Big John Dancer, or some of the others."

"Big John, for choice! He knows something of the lay of the ground, and must know that the others are too far away for a night-dash from this camp. If he gets there first, we'll catch more lead than dollars, but I'm going to try it a whack, anyway!"

"And if we get there first—as we can! we'll pick up both revenge and plunder, besides scoring yet another point against the fools who hang back and call themselves Friendlies!"

By this time all was in readiness for the night-dash, and taking the lead, Dave Darnell rode briskly up the valley, heading for a pass which offered an easy method of putting those rocky hills behind them, when they would have good riding up to the very hearthstone of their chosen victims.

There was no time spent in laying plans or giving orders. The plot had been elaborated several days before, and each man knew just what was to be done, not only by himself, but by the gang as a whole.

Big John Dancer, head of the family which they had doomed to loss of property, if not of life as well, was a prominent character in those parts, not only for his growing wealth in hoofs and horns, but through his sturdy opposition to the dangerous ghost-dance craze which was spreading like wild-fire throughout the land.

Although a half-blood, and in his earlier days as wild and savage a raider as the Cheyennes could boast, now that he had married a white woman and settled down, he showed energy and enterprise of an entirely different quality.

Among other facts worthy of note, was his importing blooded stallions for the purpose of improving his stock, and such success had rewarded him, that his home-herd was noted far and wide for its high quality and money value.

This much to explain the words passed by Dave Darnell from man to man as they left their horses in hiding, and prepared to steal upon their victims.

"You know Big John corrals his choice stock every night, since this racket began, and those of you who haven't spied out the lay of the ground, have had a careful description. That's enough. Those I've told off, will raid the corral and stables, and the rest will lay low to down Big John and his Irish cubs as they break cover at the row. You know what you've got to do; now—do it!"

That was all the instructions needed or given, and then the evil gang began stealing nearer the dark and silent ranch-house of logs, cast into deep shadow by the trees which clustered around it, serving as shade in summer, and a wind-break in winter.

Tom Frinkle had originally been one of those selected to take care of the choice stock, but at his own request, Darnell had given him permission to join those who were detailed to do the shooting, in case the alarm should bring the Dancers forth to defend their property.

He had begged this as a favor, even to the last moment hoping that by so serving, he might get another chance to kill or capture the man he so bitterly hated. And even yet he clung to that hope, though nothing had been seen or heard of Big Horn Buck during that night ride.

The fact, too, of the ranch being so quiet, without a light to be seen by the keenest of eyes, did not entirely discourage him. The Border Beagle was not to be judged by what ordinary men might do, and this very quietness might be of his own designing, the better to match the enemy at their own game.

"But I don't reckon he's had time to come up," Frinkle kept telling himself as he crept along until his chosen covert was gained. "If he'd only show up right now! If he only would!"

Dave Darnell had likewise reached the point he was aiming for, and was just lifting a bent finger to his lips, for the purpose of giving the agreed-upon signal, when a fierce yell burst forth, followed by a brief but furious struggle among the bushes.

CHAPTER XII.

SAVED BY AN ENEMY.

WITH a fierce rage such as he never thought to feel toward the son of Luke Woodbridge, Big Horn Buck uttered those words, one hand extending down the valley, its quivering forefinger marking the coming of Dave Darnell and his lawless gang of cut-throats.

Silverblade drew back a pace, but it was not through fear. His reply came sharp and stern, though sounding so cold and even:

"Why not save first, talk after? That is what the Shoshone would do, if his friends were in danger."

"Will you help save them?" swiftly asked the detective, a ray of hope coming back as he peered into that proud, stern face.

"Point out the right trail, and Silverblade asks no help."

"Even those in danger are numbered among the Friendlies your Messiah branded with his curse?"

"Are they any worse than those devils?" nodding toward the outlaws, now nearly up to the deserted camp.

"Any one of 'em is worth a million such curs!" flashed Horton, but holding his powerful emotions in check after a fashion, all the while striving to read the truth in that stern face before him. "If you had heard, as I heard, yonder devils talking about— Boy!" his subdued tones growing husky as he caught a hand and gripped it firmly. "There is a young girl in the family those devils have picked out as their next victims, and her fate was to be—"

"Will talk save her, brother?"

"No, but with you to back me up, there is still a chance that she may be saved, even though her relatives perish, and—"

"Come! If my brother must talk, let him do so from the saddle."

"Good enough!" and Big Horn Buck actually clasped the young half-blood in his strong arms for an instant, then sprung away toward their horses. "For all your talk, Davie, you're pure white, from crown to sole!"

"I am red—all red!"

"Then your practice and your theory don't jibe worth a cent!" the border detective laughed, as he freed his horse and sprung lightly into the saddle. "But we'll not quarrel now—nor ever, if I can help it!"

"Too much talk," gruffly muttered the Shoshone, as he likewise mounted. "More do, less say!"

If the lay of the ground had been more favorable, it is doubtful if Big Horn Buck would have followed this terse advice; but it took both nerve and skill to maintain anything beyond a walk, just then, and knowing that lives might depend on minutes won, Horton kept his peace until they were fairly clear of the hills.

This consumed a great deal of time, and it was an anxious glance which the Border Beagle cast toward the moon as they struck the comparatively level prairie, breaking into a gallop as he headed for the distant ranch, whose inmates he hoped to save from the raiders.

It was not often that the detective—a veteran in experience, though he was little more than thirty years of age—permitted his heart to gain the ascendancy over his brain, but his feverish excitement, now that the race against odds had fairly begun, proved that this was to mark an exception. He could not keep silent, and though he could see that Silverblade shrunk from further talk, he soon broke the silence which had reigned between them for so long.

"You've heard tell of Big John Dancer, haven't you, Davie?"

"How should I hear? Silverblade was never in these parts before."

"Well, he's a man mighty well worth saving on his own account, not to speak of his women-folk. And they—I can't talk of her!" his voice breaking a bit, as that comely face and trim figure rose before his mind's eye.

"Why talk at all? Leave that to squaws. Braves act. If they win, talk is useless. If they fail, they can't talk, for they are dead."

Silverblade seemed determined to make Horton regard him as an Indian, pure and simple, if actions and manner could bring about such a change; but Horton was not readily bluffed, and as they rode along he persisted in telling the half-blood about Big John Dancer and his family, as well as how he had made their acquaintance.

That was through his having made his headquarters at the Dancer Ranch for more than a week past, while trying to strike the trail of a notorious gang of law-breakers: none other than that led by Dave Darnell. And it was while following up a faint scent, that he had been captured by the enemy.

While in their hands, waiting for death, he heard enough of their talk to form a pretty clear idea of their intentions, and in hopes of delaying them until it would be too late to strike their blow that night, he had played about the enemy, as detailed.

So much being made clear, Big Horn Buck went on to speak of the Cheyenne half-blood, and his family. He had been fortunate enough to meet and marry an Irish girl, and that proved the turning-point in his life. Norah made a true man of him, in addition to bearing him two sons and a daughter: Patrick and Dennis, now men grown, and Mary, a more than comely daughter of seventeen.

"That's the whole population of Dancer Ranch, Davie. They keep no cowboys, though their cattle are among the thousands, and their horses as many hundred. But the three men are a host in themselves, as I hope you'll soon see for yourself."

"And the squaws, brother?" with a faint smile, as he flashed a side-glance into that strong, honest face.

"I thought of Enola when I first saw Mary. That ought to be quite enough to answer one half of your question, at all events. As for her mother—never mind! Talk enough for now. We're getting there!"

"Not the first, though!" muttered Silverblade, pointing ahead, where a faint shadow seemed moving across the plain, far in advance.

Horton smothered a curse in his throat, and then, heading for a point of cover which he had already selected should such an emergency arise,

the two pards left their horses, looked to their weapons, then swiftly yet noiselessly advanced.

The same cover of which Darnell's gang took advantage, now stood honest men in good stead, and the pards were drawing near the silent ranch, when what bade fair to prove a fatal mishap, took place.

Tom Frinkle caught the sound as Silverblade trod upon a dry stick that lay hidden under the leaves and grass, parting with a snap under his weight. He sprung to his feet with a wild scream, for he recognized Buck Horton, just beyond. He tried to fling up a pistol, but before he could do this, the half-blood was upon him, striking with the flat of his tomahawk, his white blood gaining the upper hand once more.

"Quick! for the house!" cried Horton, snatching up the fallen form and tossing it across his bowed shoulders. "It's our only chance!"

Running swiftly, apparently without feeling the weight of his burden, Big Horn Buck dashed from cover and straight for the still dark building, Silverblade running lightly by his side.

The instant they reached the open, Dave Darnell yelled out savagely, at the same time opening fire with both pistols. And, from Winchester as well as revolvers, bullets came hissing after those racing forms.

Not only were they menaced from the rear. Crack, sping, bang! came shots from the ranch itself, though Horton called out that they were friends, not enemies.

It seemed a miracle that such should be the case, but the two pards actually gained the friendly darkness under the trees surrounding the building, alive, and without serious hurt!

"Stand 'em off, if they close in, boy!" cried Horton, then making his voice even more distinct as he added: "You know me, Dancer! I'm Big Horn, and those are Darnell's gang! Open up, or we're all gone!"

Even as he spoke, the heavy door before which they stood was swung open, and then slammed shut the instant they passed across the threshold. And while Big John spoke, his sons were shooting.

"What is it, friend? Why have you—what's this?" as the Border Beagle dropped his limp burden to the floor, to fill his hands with firearms and jump toward one of the loop-holes.

"A raid on your stock, John, and murder if you try to save 'em by breaking cover," was his swift response.

The still sleepy half-blood stared almost stupidly from face to face, frowning a bit darker as he noted the Indian garb of the young Shoshone, but as Silverblade thrust his rifle through a loop and added a couple of shots to the fusillade maintained by the others, his heavy brows began to smooth once more.

"They don't know what to do first!" grimly laughed Horton, peering through the smoke-veiled loop for a brief space. "We kicked their ideas and plans all crooked, Davie!"

"There's one that'll do a bit of kicking on his own account!" the younger of the two sons observed, with an echoing laugh, only to have the remark capped by his brother with:

"Nine's past kicking, Dennis!"

"And the rest have drawn off to think it over," chimed in Horton, turning away from his loop to speak rapidly, earnestly, with John Dancer, though his big brown eyes passed on to rest with a softened yet troubled light upon the face of Mary, Big John's only daughter.

"It's hard luck, my friend—mighty hard luck! They'll sweep your stock clear, even if they don't come again for blood!"

"They must pay for every scalp before taking it," was the grim response, and he might have said more, only for the coming forward of Silverblade, who spoke rapidly, almost harshly:

"Too much talk! Is there a way out on that side?" with a nod to the rear of the building.

"What do you want to do, pardner? Go for help?"

"Tell me where the nearest help can be found, and I will go. They are too many to fight, when they bring fire to help. Quick! if they have time to surround the house, there'll be no such thing as getting away without being seen!"

In his strong excitement, the half-blood unconsciously forgot to maintain his Indian-like method of speaking, but that fact only convinced Big Horn Buck of his thorough fidelity, now that the real test of honest manhood was applied.

"He's right, and I answer for him with my life, Dancer!" said the detective, as Big John drew back with an air of distrust. "You can do the trick, Davie, if any man can, so—" and he hastily but clearly gave the Shoshone directions for his best course in search of help.

He had scarcely completed those few words,

when Mary Dancer came back from a tour of inspection which she had taken at the first word of leaving the ranch by the rear, and she said in clear, musical tones:

"I looked, but none of the enemy have come to that side, as yet, father. But if it is not safe, there is—"

"Come!" said Big John, nodding to the two pards, then leading the way to the rear room, where he quickly unhooked a stout shutter.

"If I live, I will bring back help," said Silverblade, then slipped through the window and disappeared from their anxious gaze.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BORDER BEAGLE AT BAY.

BIG HORN BUCK held his rifle at a ready, his keen gaze sweeping back and forth across the moonlighted space beyond the clump of trees, searching for what he prayed not to discover: sign or presence of the enemy on that side of the ranch.

His ears were strained to follow the daring young half-blood, but not a sound came back to tell him what Silverblade was doing. He cautiously peered over the window-sill, fully expecting to catch sight of his pard crouching where his moccasined feet first touched the ground; but the son of Weenamoo had vanished as utterly as though the earth had opened to swallow that peace-offering.

Before Horton could extend his observation, Mrs. Dancer came in and spoke hurriedly to her husband, and catching a word or two, the Border Beagle turned swiftly to utter:

"What's that about my man, John?"

"It's dying he is, with the bitter black curse on his two lips!" agitatedly explained Norah Dancer, but Horton waited for no more, springing to the front room, where Tom Frinkle still lay on the floor, much as his hated enemy had dropped him on effecting an entrance after that race through a hailstorm of lead.

Patrick Dancer was on his knees, examining the wounds of the outlaw by the light of the candle held by his sister Mary, while their brother Dennis kept armed watch over the movements of the enemy.

"Tis little use he has for the likes of us, Mr. Horton," gravely spoke young Dancer, looking up as the detective approached.

"It can't be so bad as that! The boy struck him wit the flat, and that wasn't— Holy smoke!"

As Big Horn Buck bent over the prostrate figure, Tom Frinkle flashed forth his knife and made a feeble, uncertain stroke at the throat of his hated enemy; but it was not this venomous action that drew forth such a sharp, amazed ejaculation from those stern lips.

Horton saw that the outlaw was lying in a puddle of his own blood, and after disarming his hand, a hasty inspection revealed the cause.

Although neither Silverblade nor Horton had been seriously injured by the storm of lead sent after them by Dave Darnell and his startled gang, no less than three bullets had hit Tom Frinkle as his senseless body formed a shield to the back of the Border Beagle!

"They're coming with a rush, I'm thinking!" just then Dennis Dancer called out in warning, at the same time trying to secure a death-shot at one of those swiftly flitting shadows.

Big Horn Buck swiftly disarmed the wounded outlaw, then bade Mary keep watch over the knave, and call for help in case he tried to move or do any mischief. He had time for no more. As it was, the brothers had fired their second shot apiece before he found his loop, and the lawless gang were still coming!

Under ordinary circumstances, with room for eyes to work in unison with hands, and daylight to define objects by, any one of those defenders would have felt shame at having to waste two bullets on a single target; but it is quite another thing, this firing through a loophole so narrow that moving an inch to either side will blind at least one eye, with one's target in constant motion, never twice taking the same shape or size, crouching, running, dodging and leaping, but always coming nearer, always—

And so it came to pass that Dave Darnell, with a picked band of his most desperate fellows, actually gained cover of the darkness immediately surrounding the log building, and pausing barely long enough to gather fresh breath after their wild gymnastics, made a desperate rush at the front door, hoping to burst it open before the inmates could fairly divine their intention.

The shock was heavy, but so were the squared timbers composing the door. The outlaws recoiled, to come again, and yet again. But at their third assault, Big John Dancer had open an angling loop, through which he could com-

mand the space immediately in front of the door, and his revolver spat death into that huddled mass.

"Save me!" screamed Tom Frinkle, at the top of his shrill voice. "Get me free, or I'll sell out everything!"

Big Horn Buck gave a snarl of fury as he sprung back to where his enemy lay, cramming a fold of blanket over his mouth, though he knew that the harm had been done. That mingled threat and entreaty surely must have been heard and comprehended by the outlaws, and now they would not dare retreat with their black work unfinished.

Retreat they did, now that they found themselves exposed to a cross-fire which they were unable to return, and once more the Dancers had brief practice in shooting at flitting shadows.

"It's plenty o' digging we'll have, the day, if we honor each divil with a lone grave by himself!" chuckled Dennis, as he replenished his magazine and filled his revolvers with fresh shells. "Sure, then, it's not the biggest half o' them that went back the same way they came!"

"Keep back from the loop, or—you see!" growled Big John, as the sharp report rung forth, and a bullet glanced from an inner edge of the aperture through which Dennis had just been peering.

There was no need to ask questions. All present knew that at least a portion of the evil gang had found cover among the trees, ready to fire "at the flash." And long before day dawned, their bitter black work would be accomplished, if the defenders tried to pick off their prowling foes, as before.

Now that there came a lull in the hot work, Big Horn Buck took time in which to examine the hurts of his prisoner more thoroughly, paying no attention to the vicious curses and mad threats which Tom Frinkle gave forth at each labored breath.

Only one of the three shots had passed completely through that lank form, and Horton involuntarily gave his own shoulder a hitch as he marked the nature of that particular wound. The lead that caused it, had barked him, as well!

Either of the hurts were enough to cause serious apprehension, had he who took notes been dear friend or close relative to the sufferer. Taken together, Horton felt that it was little short of a miracle that Tom Frinkle had ever regained his senses.

"Better be praying, instead of cursing, Frinkle," he said, gravely, after moving the outlaw to a little bedroom, where he would be less in the way. "You'll never live to be hanged, as I thought. You'll be a corpse before the sun comes up again!"

Knowing the wounded wretch could do no further harm, Big Horn Buck left him there, without pausing to hear the end of those horrible oaths and curses. And closing the door behind him, Horton joined John Dancer, to consult over their situation and their chances for pulling through with life.

At the very best, the case was gloomy enough. And as proof positive that the evil gang meant worse than mere plunder, Big John spoke of his as yet untouched herd of blooded horses.

"I know," nodded the detective, his face paling a bit as he looked toward Mary Dancer. "They meant to stampede the stock, first, then pick you off when you came out to see what kicked up the racket. They meant to scatter your cattle, then leave them to be gobbled up by stray bands of hostiles. Then, when investigation came, the whole blame would be laid upon the Indians. But now—"

There was no need to finish. His meaning was reflected in that strong, gloomy face, and with Mary glancing that way, Horton found it hard to utter such black words. And so he shifted to a more agreeable point, all for her sake.

"If we can beat 'em back until day, Silverblade will bring help."

"Who is he? What is he? I don't like his looks!" growled Dancer.

Big Horn Buck explained, rapidly sketching the history of his young pard, but his words only deepened the doubts of the half-blood, who had taken an instinctive dislike to the son of Weenamoo at first sight. Still, there was one point gained: Mary seemed encouraged by his words, and considerable time was killed by the explanation.

Big Horn Buck brought that explanation to an end much sooner than he would otherwise have done, for a growing scent of smoke forced itself upon his nostrils, and he rose to his feet with a start.

"Surely I smell fire!" he ejaculated, then staring at John Dancer, who was laughing, softly, yet harshly.

"Yes. John smelled it a good while. Pretty soon you see it, I guess, too! Maybe so have to feel it, eh?"

Despite that laugh, that forced composure, the real excitement felt by the half-blood was betrayed by his lapsing into dialect. As a usual thing his English was fairly good, thanks to Norah, his wife, and Mary, their daughter. But now the Cheyenne blood was coming to the surface.

It was only too true, as Horton quickly realized by the increase of smoke and the red tinge the flames were lending the moonlighted space beyond those trees. The cabin had been fired, and even if water was abundant enough to drown the blaze, Dave Darnell and his blood-thirsty gang were on the keen alert to prevent any such attempt.

Big Horn Buck passed from room to room, taking observations on all sides of the ranch. He saw that the building was now completely surrounded by the enemy, and knew that the exploit of Silverblade could no longer be duplicated. To attempt to leave the house under that red glow, would be pretty much the same as committing suicide.

All doubts on this point settled, Horton rejoined John Dancer, who stood near one of the loopholes, rifle in readiness to exact at least one more life in exchange for his own and that of his dear ones.

"There's no way to fight the fire, John?" softly asked Horton.

"No way," came the grimly muttered response.

"Then we can't count on the boy's getting back in time with help from your neighbors, but—John?"

"John's ears are wide: let my brother speak his thoughts."

"We are four, and each one a man. We can make a good fight, if we once get room to turn about in. The devils keep watch on all sides, but they are thicker here in front. We'll wait until it grows too hot, then make a dash, and die like men! Eh, John?"

"Four braves, but two squaws. Does my brother forget them?"

"It's them I'm thinking of, John," with a grim laugh. "We'll kick up a racket big enough to fetch the whole gang around in front, then Mary and her mother can slip out at the back, and get clear. See?"

"You would die for them?" slowly asked Dancer, their eyes meeting.

"Gladly, if they—if Mary can only be saved, John," was the low, earnest response.

"Good! You are a true man!" nodded Dancer, as their right hands came together in a firm clasp.

With naught to check their progress, the flames soon ate through the roof, making the interior unbearable, and then Big Horn Buck said:

"I reckon it's time we were moving, John, if we're to give the women a fair chance for their lives. Don't you reckon so?"

"It is time. Come!"

CHAPTER XIV.

RIDING TO THE RESCUE.

WHEN Silverblade started on his perilous mission, he acted rapidly, rightly believing that decision was better than deliberation at that stage of the game.

Although Mary had reported no signs of the enemy on that side of the building, and though his own keen glance had detected naught to be feared, none knew better than the young Shoshone that he might be going to his death as he slipped through the opened window.

There was cover enough close at hand to furnish hiding for a dozen enemies, and more than one deadly marksman might even then be training his sights on that opening shutter. And for that reason, as much as any other, the instant his moccasined feet touched ground, Silverblade crouched low down and glided swiftly to the left, thus, in a breath, as it were, vanishing from the gaze of his anxious partner.

The half-expected shot did not come, and as Silverblade saw the heavy slab shutter close, he bent low and stole swiftly away from the log ranch.

He knew that he had escaped observation thus far, else bullets would have come in haste to form his acquaintance, even if the outlaws feared to make an actual charge. And knowing this, he took longer chances than he would have deemed advisable under different circumstances, in order to leave the ranch fairly behind him before his escape could be discovered.

The lay of the ground favored him to some extent, and his swift movements did the rest. Without shot or shout to denote discovery, the young half-blood crossed the comparatively

open space, to pause when fairly under cover beyond.

From that position he could catch glimpses of the enemy, skulking about, and knew that they were making preparations for a desperate assault on the ranch building. His heart beat swiftly, his hands gripped the rifle he had brought with him, and its polished stock flew up to touch shoulder and cheek as he covered the nearest outlaw.

His finger touched trigger, but he did not fire, though it was very hard to refrain. Only fears of increasing the peril of the besieged, by letting the evil gang know one had escaped to ride for assistance, could have withheld his hand just then.

"No," his brain spoke as he turned away and hastened along in the direction where he hoped to find the horses left by Big Horn Buck and himself. "There is a time for playing fox, as well as a time for showing teeth of mountain lion! It would be a good fight, but Silverblade is young: he can wait for his first scalp, *since he must!*"

Nothing rose in his path to block his way, and Silverblade found the two horses just as they had been left. A low nicker greeted his coming, but a single word caused the intelligent creatures to be still, and the half-blood was quickly in his own saddle.

For a moment he debated whether or not to take Horton's steed with him, as a change mount, but then decided in the negative. It was barely possible that, should worst come to worst, the Border Beagle might fight his way clear, only to lose his life for lack of a horse, should he find this one missing.

Still another sore temptation assailed the Shoshone as he rode away from that spot, forced as he was to make a half-circle around the enemy, in order to gain the direction given him by Big Horn Buck as that he must follow in order to reach the nearest ranch where aid might be obtained.

Why not make a bold dash upon that evil gang? Why not try to intimidate them by shots, and yells, and desperate charging? If they could be made to think a rescuing force was at hand, would they not break in terror, and abandon the assault, almost before it was begun?

Once more reason came to the rescue, and Silverblade reluctantly abandoned that notion. If the gang had been all in a bunch, such an exploit might have proved successful, but long before a panic could spread along that curved line, some one among the enemy would recognize the half-blood, and even should he win clear with life, his escape would only warn them to swifter work, in order to have all over before aid could be brought upon the scene.

Thus it came about that Silverblade sped away from the Dancer Ranch without firing a shot, or having a shot fired at him. To his hot heart, for the first time beating with the fever of battle, it seemed almost like a cowardly flight, but he fought back that shameful sensation, and before long thought only of performing his important mission with as little loss of time as might be.

At least two things were against him, when he came to sum up the chances: the great distance the nearest ranch lay from the besieged cabin, and the condition of his horse.

Although a swift and sturdy beast, it had been ridden hard that night, and while willingly responding to his voice and touch, racing along like a thoroughbred, Silverblade knew that even its powers had their limit. And so, like a true horseman, he nursed its powers as much as he dared, lending it aid with rein and hand, in so far showing himself a white, rather than a red-skin.

As he left mile after mile behind him, Silverblade cast many an anxious glance over his shoulder in the direction of the long-since invisible ranch. He had little fear of the place being carried by direct assault, with four such stout hearts to beat back the outlaws, but he did fear fire!

And then, when the night was far spent, and he was beginning to look ahead for some sign to tell him that his destination was not much further along, a hoarse, fierce cry broke from his lips.

There was a dull red glow along the sky-line, many miles away, but only too well did he read its terrible meaning.

"The devils! They've fired the cabin!" he gasped, wrenching up his sweat-damp horse, and half-wheeling to dash back, to share the fate of Big Horn Buck and his friends.

Only for a single breath, then he turned and dashed along his original course, riding now as an Indian rides, caring naught for his good

horse, thinking only of reaching his destination with the least possible loss of time. Let the horse die, but let him bring his master to the nearest ranch!

"If too late to save, I'll avenge!" he kept muttering; and it was David Woodbridge that spoke now, not Silverblade, the Ghost Dancer.

Rapidly that lurid glow spread, higher, brighter, blotting out the twinkling stars, holding the feverish gaze of the mad rider as by a magic spell. He left his horse to keep a true line of itself, for he could not refrain from watching that terrible beacon—the signal of death, as he knew only too well!

Only for this constant looking backward, Silverblade might have avoided what followed, but his first intimation of breakers ahead, came in the shape of a loud, clear, stern challenge:

"Halt! hands up, or fare worse, stranger!"

He turned like a flash, but before he could jerk up his horse, the half-blood found himself barely a dozen yards distant from a number of armed men, afoot but with leveled guns, while a single horseman was just trotting up and over the sharp swell behind which their ambush had been placed.

Silverblade was lifting his Winchester, when he caught a faint glitter that opened his mental eyes, and he hastily called out:

"Don't shoot, if you're soldiers!"

"Down gun, and up hands, then," came the same voice as its owner kept advancing. "We're Cheyenne Scouts, who are you?"

"You're white—you're honest? You'll ride to save men of your own race from being roasted like—come, if ye are men!" hoarsely cried the half-crazed youth, his over-tasked powers threatening to fail him now that he saw even such a dim hope of rescuing his friend.

The horseman, young and handsome, bearing the straps of a lieutenant of the regular army on his blouse, came still closer, and his hand closed on the arm of the half-blood before answering or speaking.

"Who are you, my man? Who's in danger? That fire is near the Big John Ranch, and—"

"Dave Darnell is burning the ranch. Big Horn Buck is penned up in there, and—"

"The devil you say!" exploded Lieutenant Casey, turning toward his men and shouting:

"Mount and follow! There's work for us over yonder!"

There was precious little delay. Those in charge of the horses were already bringing them up the slope, and in less than another minute the Cheyenne Scouts were in saddle and following after their gallant young chief.

As they rode along, Silverblade, still Indian enough to extract a remarkable degree of speed out of an exhausted animal, the half-blood swiftly sketched what had transpired at the Dancer Ranch, up to the time of his leaving it to bring back assistance.

"I knew Big Horn was up in these parts, for I had a hint to be on the lookout for him, in case he should require any assistance when he had trailed that gang home, and so—your nag is about played, man!"

"Silverblade can run," was the laconic response, as the Shoshone sprung from his saddle, rifle in hand, doing it all so deftly, that the rapid pace was not broken in the slightest degree.

But Lieutenant Casey only watched him for a few seconds, smiling in grim approval. Then Silverblade was mounted behind one of the Cheyenne Scouts, leaving the jaded horse to follow at will, or to be picked up later, if fate should so decide.

The night was nearly spent when Silverblade met the Scouts, who had broken camp several miles beyond that point of meeting, taking saddle as soon as the guard reported a growing light to the north. The dawn of day found them still far from the Dancer Ranch, and though they maintained that rapid pace, all knew that it was not because of the coming sun alone that yonder lurid glow grew dimmer until it could hardly be seen at all.

"It's a thousand pities we couldn't make it in time to save, but we'll do our level best to avenge!" declared the young chief of scouts, in hard, stern tones. "Big Horn Buck was worth a thousand common men at any time, but just now he would be beyond all price! He knows this whole country like a printed page, and could do more than a regiment to check this infernal ghost-dance racket?"

"I am a Ghost Dancer, sir," quietly said the half-blood.

"Oh, hush!" laughed Casey, though he frowned a bit at what he deemed but an untimely effort at a joke. "Don't claim the name too often, or you'll be taken at your word, and turned into a ghost, for keeps!"

Still on, as rapidly as their horses could stand the pressure, but only to find empty corrals, bare grounds, a glowing mass of ruins where bad so lately stood the substantial log building!

"We did our level best, as you can testify, young man," said Casey, in grave tones, as he drew rein. "All gone; all lost!"

"Who says so?" came a voice from—whither?

CHAPTER XV.

A FINAL APPEAL.

SCATTERED here and there were blotches of heat-dried blood, but not even a corpse lay within range of those wondering eyes. Surely that voice could not have come from any place of concealment beneath that heap of glowing ruins!

For a single breath even Silverblade shrunk back, though he had at once recognized the voice of his pard, Big Horn Buck, but rallying as swiftly, he sprung to the ground and ran toward a low grass and weed-covered mound, only a few rods from where the cabin had stood.

And, lifting higher a sod-covered door, Big Horn Buck sprung into view, to be clasped in the bare arms of the young Shoshone, while after him came the Dancer family, from Big John down to little Mary!

Explanations were in order, and little time was lost in making all points clear, for which there was ample opportunity. Lieutenant Casey declared that he would take the trail with his scouts, and recover the stolen stock, but an hour or two spent in resting their animals and feeding themselves, would be more than made up in the end.

Leaving Big John and his boys to tell their story, Horton led his young pard into the cyclone-pit, and showing him another cunningly-hidden door in one of the four walls, briefly made clear the manner in which all had been saved, just when all seemed lost.

"John didn't give me a hint, even, until I lifted a hand to throw off the bar across the front door," Horton explained, taking note of the half-sneer which came into the face of Silverblade as he drew back from his brief look into the narrow tunnel revealed by that door. "He didn't trust me, any more than he had trusted you, Davie, when he snapped little Mary up so short that time. She was going to say that you might steal out by this pass, but Big John wouldn't hear her through."

Then Horton went on to tell of the fight, the fire, the desperate resolve he had taken as the only chance he saw for the two women escaping with their lives. And when to linger longer meant certain death to them all, Big John Dancer made known his carefully-guarded secret.

In common with nearly every Western ranch, the Dancers had built an outside cellar or pit, for refuge in case a tornado should happen that way. But the half-blood had done more: he had run a tunnel from beneath the log cabin to the cellar, and then, with true Indian caution, had masked it with a cunningly-contrived door in the wall.

Of course, there was a chance that some of the enemy had discovered what that low mound—lower than common, since Big John made his secret as perfect as possible—meant, and had chosen it as cover for their bodies while waiting for the desperate rush on the part of their victims; but that was a chance they must risk.

Providentially, however, everything went well, and the little party gained the cyclone-cellar without being suspected.

"I had to hold the fort, though, Davie," laughing grimly at the remembrance. "Literally hold it, with my guns, too! Big John was hotter than his own cabin, just then, and his boys weren't chunks of ice. They wanted out, and swore they'd clean the whole gang rather than lay still and let the imps make away with all the stock. And if Mary and her mother hadn't backed me up, there'd have been a mighty sight more sign laying around loose than you found, too!"

"Fire would break its teeth trying to eat this!" muttered Silverblade, glancing at the stone roof, covered deeply with earth. "Four braves could fight hard, here!"

The Border Beagle nodded assent, with a low laugh before adding:

"You're right, Davie, and so Big John said. But we had two women to consider, and then—if Dave Darnell and his imps felt dead sure we all were wiped out by the fire, wouldn't he be more careless in getting away with his plunder? Wouldn't it be easier to catch up with, and pay him back? That was my main idea, of course."

Silverblade's face lightened up at this shrewd explanation, which an Indian, as he now claimed to be, could appreciate so thoroughly.

Leaving the cyclone-pit, the two pards joined the Cheyenne scouts in their hastily prepared meal, but both Silverblade and Horton declined the proposal made by Lieut. Casey, that they join him in the chase of Darnell's gang.

"I'll try to be in at the death, pardner," nodded the Border Beagle, "but the ladies come first, in my mind. I'm going to see them safe under a friendly roof, before I do anything else. But if Davie, here, cares to go, you'll find him equal to your very best."

"Silverblade is going—but not on the white man's road," coldly said the half-blood, abruptly rising and turning away.

Big Horn Buck quickly followed after, for something in that face gave him a disagreeable warning of what the future held in store.

"Davie, lad!" he called out, when beyond ear-shot of the others.

"David is dead. I am Silverblade."

"Be Silverblade, then, but don't be a lunatic, pard!" said Horton, as he slipped a hand through that reluctant arm, slowly moving on as the half-blood declined to stay his steps altogether. "You must get that absurd craze out of your brain, sooner or later: why not right now?"

"If it is crazy to walk in the trail marked out by the Messiah, then Silverblade will stay crazy. He has seen, he has heard. He has stood face to face with the New Messiah, and when his bullets failed to kill the shining truth, then the last drop of white blood flew out of his body."

"I tell you, boy, it was all a cunning trick, and I'll prove as much, if you'll only give me time enough. You were fooled by that devil, the father of John Godfrey, and if you go on as he started you, you'll bring up in a bloody grave, if no worse!"

Silverblade quietly but resolutely set his arm free, facing the detective, his black eyes with a red tinge in their depths, his voice hard and unshaken.

"Big Horn, drops of poison fall from your tongue, but my ears are closed to them, and they cannot sink so deep as my heart, for the way to that is filled with the blessing of the Indian Messiah. I do not curse your belief: why should you try to blacken mine? I bid you go the road your heart tells you is right: why do you step in front of the Shoshone when he follows the trail marked out by his Great Father, the New Messiah?"

"Because that trail leads to death! Because I promised your father and your sister, Enola, to bring Davie back to their hearts, if I ever was lucky enough to meet him again."

"There was a mother: did Weenamoo, too, beg Big Horn to steal her son away from the Indian Messiah?"

Horton changed color, but he would not lie, even then.

"Your mother didn't know I expected to meet you, Davie."

"Or Weenamoo would have said: 'Tell the grandson of He-That-Fights-Long, to be true to his blood, his color, his belief!' And that is what Silverblade means to do, Big Horn, unless you stop him, right here."

"I wish to heaven I only could!"

"There is only one way: call yonder white hearts with red skins! Tell them that Silverblade is going to join Sitting Bull, the representative of the Indian Messiah. Say that Silverblade means to dance and earn the ghost-shirt, and dance again—dance until the Indian Messiah comes down to earth with the death-word on his lips!"

"If I said half as much, Davie, they'd put you in irons, or kill you trying!" exploded the border detective.

"They are yonder; Silverblade is here; Big Horn can send his voice further than that. Why does he not shout aloud the words?" coldly asked the young fanatic, a curious smile curling his lips the while.

"I'd ought to do it, too! But—you'd fight the lot, Davie, and when it came to that pitch, I'd have to help you die, by fighting with you! Only for that—"

"Let Big Horn look back," said Silverblade, touching his arm, his somber face lighting up with a brief smile as he glanced toward Mary Dancer, who was approaching the two pards. "Even from here the Shoshone can see two bright eyes. Would Big Horn bring bitter tears to dim them, by inviting death?"

"Throw off this mad craze, Davie, and I'll do my level best to help you win the little girl for a wife!" hoarsely muttered Horton, his face turning pale as its liberal coating of tan would admit.

"She'll be the making of you, and—"

"She is to be won, but not by Silverblade,"

that smile passing into a low, friendly laugh, as he added rapidly: "Love lies back of those bright eyes, brother, but it is not for the Shoshone. Sing the sweet song in her ears, brother, and when she answers back, take her to your heart and—carry her far across the salt water! You are white, you scoff at the Indian Messiah, but Silverblade cannot hate you, even for that! And so he says—Flee from the wrath to come, while there is yet time!"

With those words, the young fanatic sprung back from the hands which would have detained him, and then turned away, his face set toward the distant agency, where he expected to find Sitting Bull.

CHAPTER XVI.

SILVERBLADE, THE GHOST DANCER.

THE camp of Sitting Bull, mighty medicine-man of the Sioux!

That camp, when the reader is asked to gaze upon the weird exhibition taking place under the immediate supervision of the crafty old sinner, Sitting Bull, was located in a "pocket," with a river flowing on the south, and low-lying hills circling to the east, north and west.

Inside of this natural amphitheater is a mile square of almost perfectly level country, marked with timber along the base of the elevated grounds. Near the center of the level tract rises a tall pole, striped with bright paint, and ornamented with fluttering bits of ribbon and bright cloth. It is the medicine-pole of the Ghost-Dancers.

East of this pole, stands the Medicine Lodge of Sitting Bull, now occupied by himself, putting on the last touches of paint which each brave must wear before joining in the ghost-dance.

The prophet wears his "ghost shirt, gayly embroidered with parti-colored beads forming a twisted serpent across his shoulders, and emblems painted on its front. His face also bears the mystic symbols of the society. A deep blue-black ground-work, on each cheek a red cross, on chin and forehead a blue crescent, while in his long hair are white, fluffy feathers of the eagle; pure white from tip to stem, for these are not the painted eagle-plumes worn by warriors, but the badge of the secret society known far and wide as Ghost Dancers.

The braves intending to join in the dance on this occasion have formed in line, and each one pauses before an assistant prophet, who imprints each cheek with a red cross, before the candidate is passed into the Medicine Lodge for the finger of Sitting Bull to add the crescents in blue. After this is done, the braves pass out and form in a slowly growing circle around the medicine-pole, only waiting for the signal from Sitting Bull to begin their daily dance, which ends only when exhausted nature gives way.

"Why is the Shoshone alone?" gruffly demanded Sitting Bull, as a slender, lithe shape humbly bowed before the mighty medicine-man. "Are all of the Snake Children passed away from earth?"

"Their eyes are still filled with dust, father, but the breath of the Indian Messiah will surely blow that away," was the low, grave response. "Until then, Silverblade will dance and pray for all his people."

The blue paint was laid on, and the young Shoshone passed from the lodge to take his station in line.

At length the circle was complete, and Sitting Bull stepped forth from his lodge, medicine-staff in hand. He lifted the rod, and the fanatics clasped hands, locking fingers in a grip that could not be broken without mutual consent. *Thump!* echoed the hollow note of an Indian drum, and each dancer bent his head backward until his eyes were staring upward.

Thump! Another note, and the circle begins moving slowly to the left, each foot falling with a solid jar, keeping perfect time.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Sitting Bull tosses his medicine-staff high into the air, clapping his hands sharply three times before he catches the falling wand. And then the mysterious ghost-dance is fairly under headway!

Slowly at first, but gradually quickening their time, still gazing up with glazing eyes at the noonday sun, still stamping in unison, the units forming a perfect whole, circle around until the brain grows dizzy with merely watching them.

Faster and faster as the voice of Sitting Bull breaks forth in a guttural chant. Faster still, until the medicine-man ceases his invocation with a shrill screech.

And then, first one, then another of the Ghost Dancers begin a panting chant of their own, each unit forming his own supplication, but all of the same general tenor.

"Father, father, we want to see you!"

"Father, father, our hearts are aching for a sight of thy face!"

"Father, father, we want to behold the buffalo coming back!"

"Father, father, send us back the days that have vanished!"

"The days when all this country was ours!"

"Father, father, bring back those happy days!"

"Father, father, make us strong, to drive away the white man!"

"Father, father, our ears are sore with listening for your step!"

"Father, father, our hearts are crying bloody tears for you!"

And Silverblade, the son of Weenamoo, was one of the Ghost Dancers!

Lieutenant Casey made his word good, and with his gallant Cheyenne Scouts, he took the trail, pressing along it until the marauders were overtaken with their valuable booty. Thanks to the shrewdness displayed by Big Horn Buck in holding back the irate Dancer family, Dave Darnell firmly believed that the entire party was dead—roasted amid the ruins of the log cabin, dying in sullen silence rather than gratify their enemies by rushing forth to meet death in a less horrible shape. And so believing, the outlaw was far less on guard than would have been the case under other circumstances, and fell an easy prey to the Indian Scouts.

A few of the evil gang escaped by speedy flight, but, as a band, it was destroyed.

Lieutenant Casey gathered up the scattered horses, and brought them back in safety. And from that day until the present, the "Friendlies" had no stronger representatives than Big John and his family.

The Border Beagle, too, was true to his word, and refusing to join the pursuing party, though urging Big John and his two sons to go, he guided Norah Dancer and her daughter, Mary, to the nearest ranch. He would have done this without help, had not neighbors—though living so distant, still "neighbors" in the truest sense of that much abused term—come upon the scene, drawn thither by the glow of the burning ranch.

Still, it might have been worse. True, there were eyes all around them, but Big Horn Buck could draw pretty Mary apart far enough from the rest—including her mother—for many a confidential whisper, many an ardent look which, almost as clearly as words, and a great deal safer! revealed the fire that had sprung up in his honest heart!

And Mary?

Big Horn tried his level best to win a fair look in return, but all his arts failed him, during that long ride. And yet—the doughty detective did not entirely despair.

"I'll hope you can find it in your heart to return my love, little lady, until your lips swear that you never can, while your dear eyes gaze straight into mine!" he whispered, as he lifted her lithe form in his arms from the saddle, when the ranch was reached.

Even then Mary made no reply, unless it lay in the soft flush that tinged her cheek as his mustached lips gently brushed it as she came to the ground.

That was only a few months ago, but the Border Beagle had never yet lingered lazily on a soot after once striking it, and be sure he did not go back on his record while following this love-trail. And so, after the pernicious ghost-dance craze was smothered by the killing of Sitting Bull, and the exciting events which followed that fortunate tragedy, the day came around on which pretty Mary not only met that ardent gaze, but shaped words with her red lips which—well, it was not hatred of which they talked, after!

The Border Beagle played well his part throughout those exciting weeks, and when Silverblade, the Ghost Dancer, finally awoke to the truth, Big Horn Buck played a prominent part in that conversion. But before that day came around, the young Shoshone was to pass through many exciting scenes, was fated to see and suffer much, but through it all, he was true to his sense of right, mistaken though that might be.

It may be that that part of his experience will find a record, just as his temptation and his fall have been placed before the public: but if not, let it suffice that the day was to come when his eyes would once more open to the truth, and his feet again tread "the white man's road," which alone can lead the red-man to peace, happiness and prosperity.

THE END.

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